

間宮夏生

イラスト・白味噌

月光



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Design:T





Konan

Detective who looks frivolous, but is in fact frivolous.

"I may act like I'm, but I love ladies!"



Mirai Samejima

Violent woman.

"Have a problem?!"



Chizuru Usami

Girl who is always straightforward.

"I'm normal, you know?"



Nonomiya

Cynical boy who can't be frank.

"Adolescence is wonderful, isn't it?"



Youko Tsukimori

Perfect girl with stunning looks, outstanding grades and many mysteries.

"Do you remember your promise?"



[Murder Recipe]

There was no day I'd miss hearing that name.

"Tsukimori is so lovely..." muttered my classmate Kamogawa, sighing, upon which the other male students around him nodded deeply.

"Listen guys: don't let that slender body deceive you! Got me? She's also got... boobs!"

Their insolent gazes were focused on the girl in debate, Tsukimori, who was surrounded by a group of chattering girls. If I were to describe Youko Tsukimori in one word: she was eye-catching.

"Don't you agree Nonomiya?"

"If you say so."

"Wow, now that's a cold reply! Are you really a man? If there's a mountain, climb it! If there's a beautiful chick, fall for her! Isn't that what it means to be a man?"

The guys, led by Kamogawa, began to show over-exaggerated reactions to my indifferent answer.

"Well, I just thought she's perfect."

She had a beautiful face, supplemented by a nice figure and outstanding grades. Her pleasing personality made her rather popular. Apparently, she was also good in sports. Youko Tsukimori seemed to be a perfect girl without anything to complain about.

"How's that bad?"

"I never said it's bad. It's just that I can't relax around her."

"Aah, that's true. Tsukimori is a girl beyond our reach after all..."

Fortunately, Kamogawa interpreted my statement to his convenience.

My honest impression was that she was so perfect it was boring and being around her would be suffocating. Maybe it's just that my personality is a little warped, but I've secretly been keeping a distance from Tsukimori because I couldn't discover a common ground between us.

However, the guys seemed to be highly interested in the famous girl and started discussing rumors about Tsukimori as if they were gossiping about some star.

"But I heard she has a boyfriend in college?"

"Student 'K', was it? That guy who's three years older than her?"

"Eh? I heard she was the lover of a company president..."

"Aah, so that's why she gets ¥200,000 in allowance every month?"

"No kidding! But I heard someone spotted her together with math teacher Kumada when they came out of a love hotel!"

There was no need for a metaphor anymore—she really was a star. I once more realized how special she was.

But then again, she might not have been happy about that special status. At least I wouldn't be able to stand it.

"It's all just rumors without any credibility whatsoever."

A short laugh escaped my mouth because they were discussing this stuff all too seriously and energetically.

"Why don't you just ask her directly?" Therefore, I confronted them with that question. Just for fun. And as expected, my idea was rejected with vigor close to booing.

"As if we could ask her something like that!!"

Because I was so amused by their reaction, I spurred them on a little more. "If you want, I can go ask as the representative of the class?"

"Wait wait wait!! Nonomiya! Don't rush things! What are we gonna do if the rumors

turned out to be true?” Kamogawa rebuked me in a hurry.

“Maybe they really are just rumors?”

“But maybe it’s all true!”

The other guys nodded in agreement to Kamogawa, “Possible. If it’s Tsukimori, very possible!”

Sure enough Youko Tsukimori stood out in this class. You could even say she was of a different nature. No wonder everyone was under the impression that she had already experienced a world unbeknownst to high school students; considering that she acted so maturely it was hard to believe that she was our age.

“The truth is hidden in the dark, huh?” Whatever that truth might have been, I could take it easy since I wouldn’t be hurt by it like Kamogawa and the others.

“The truth isn’t always what’s best, is it?” But it looked like they couldn’t take it as easily since the truth would bother them much more.

“Don’t you find this unproductive? If you keep your eyes averted from the truth, you won’t ever be able to obtain what you seek!”

“We don’t care! A couple of days ago, some idiot confessed to her and got harshly rejected. If you carelessly try to reach out for something on a different level, you’re only going to fall down and hurt yourself. I prefer the ideal over the truth! You could even say we want Tsukimori to remain the source of our fantasies for all eternity.”

I was so amazed at this bunch that I could only laugh. “Adolescence is wonderful, isn’t it?”

“Hey, we’re seventeen! Leave us our dreams!”

Apparently I wasn’t supposed to laugh.

“I shall not bother you anymore if you all insist.”

“We do, we do! Don’t crush the dreams of us delicate boys.”

“You mean ‘impure high school boys’.”

“Who is our dear Nonomiya fond of then? No celebrities allowed, by the way.”

Kamogawa launched an unexpected counterattack. The other guys, too, jumped at the chance and closed ranks by leaning forward and urging, “Tell us! Tell us!”

“Well, let’s see—”

To tell the truth, there was no girl who I could have mentioned specifically, but looking at the situation I didn’t believe those impure high school boys would content themselves with that.

“—I think Usami’s cute.”

I merely spoke out the first name that came to mind right then, but they all seemed rather disappointed and made awkward faces.

“How unthrilling. It couldn’t get any more ordinary, could it? You’re so boring,” complained Kamogawa.

“So you claim that it’s *not* ordinary to feel attracted to Tsukimori?”

“I admit she’s also an ordinary target, but her quality, so to speak, is on a whole different level from Usami’s! If Usami was orange juice, Tsukimori would be wine.”

“Then don’t you agree that orange juice suits us minors?”

“No, you idiot, you don’t get it. I’m talking about the, um, well, that certain appeal of alcohol because you actually shouldn’t drink it, you know? Like, you’re curious about the forbidden world that opens there and...are you following me?”

“I certainly know what you mean. But *I* still like orange juice. Don’t you?”

“Um, well, sure, I like orange juice too, but...”

Kamogawa’s guys-alliance grumbled and contorted their faces.

While Tsukimori was an exceptional girl indeed, Usami was very charming, too — for an ordinary girl. Their reaction originated from not wanting to admit that I was right while being unable to deny it.

Feeling like the winner, I said, “Let’s toast with some orange juice and wine, then.”

You could say I tasted the “splendid wine of victory.”

“You’re a pretty damn devious guy, you know that?”

“Thank you.”

“I ain’t praising you.”

Kamogawa was still a little sour, but I had succeeded in getting the air out of him.

“—Hey, boys! Get back to your seats! Afternoon classes are starting!”

Driven by this sudden voice, the guys turned their eyes towards the clock at once. They reacted that sensitively because the warning came from the girl they were just talking about.

“She’s right. Let’s follow the advice of Orange Juice and wait at our seats,” said Kamogawa, whereupon everyone returned to their respective desks.

“Orange Juice...?” wondered Orange Juice a.k.a. Chizuru Usami and tilted her round head. “...I bet you’ve been talking bad about me or something, haven’t you?”

Usami, sitting beside me, pursed her lips.

“We were merely talking about beverages.”

“That’s a lie. If a couple of boys gather, they talk about either perverted or idiotic stuff,” she claimed.

That was a fairly unfair preconception, I had to say. Unfortunately though, I couldn’t deny it.

“...what kind of tragic life have you gone through, Usami? I’ve just become quite worried about you.”



“Don’t pity me, Nonomiya! Idiot. I’m normal! Your average high school girl!”

Usami always got all worked up in no time whenever I teased her. And once she was worked up, she was like a little animal — pretty amusing to watch, really.

“Listen, you should visit a hospital before it’s too late. If it’s too embarrassing to go alone, I can also accompany you there, but—”

“—I won’t! Stop looking at me with those commiserating eyes!”

She pushed my peeking head away with her palm: “Go away!”

“Rejoice, Usami. It seems Nonomiya is fond of orange juice!”

Kamogawa, who had been watching us, laughed with a face that made him seem like he’d only talk about perverted or idiotic stuff.

“Tell me already, what’s the thing with that orange jui—”

Usami swallowed her words mid-sentence. Our math teacher, Kumada, had entered the classroom.

The only sounds in the classroom were Kumada’s weak voice and the chalk hitting the blackboard.

Apparently our conversation was still bothering Usami; she kept stealing glances at me.

After some minutes had passed, she finally lost patience. She leaned her upper body a little towards me and whispered, “What was that about?”

“I’m trying to concentrate on the lesson, Usami-san,” I answered without removing my eyes from the blackboard.

“...don’t be mean~”

Because I kept silent, she started poking my side with her mechanical pencil. The tip pierced through the fabric of my uniform and stuck into my skin.

“Hey, that hurts.”

“Then don’t ignore me,” sulked Usami. “During lunch break, you boys were talking about Youko-san, weren’t you?”

“Oh, were we?”

“...you always try to slip off like this, Nonomiya. Actually, I know that you were gossiping about her!”

“You eavesdropped on us? I’m shocked.”

“That’s not it! I only heard Youko-san’s name by chance! Because you boys were talking so loudly!”

“Usami,” I called for her attention because Kumada had turned towards the class. She sat up in a hurry and pretended to be copying what was written on the blackboard.

After some moments of silence: “...Say, Nonomiya. You prefer girls like Youko-san too, don’t you?” muttered Usami while looking down at her notes.

I glanced towards the front right. Youko Tsukimori—the girl in question—stared charismatically at the blackboard. From the side her face looked intelligent, giving her a little of the feel of the anchorwoman from the news.

Sitting in the very middle of the room, her outstanding aura made it feel as though she were the heart of the classroom.

Indeed, she was someone special. Although I personally avoided excessive contact with her, I could very well comprehend why everyone seemed to adore her.

“—No, not particularly.”

I don’t like trouble, but I became interested in how Usami would react.

“Is that so?”

She made a smile, seeming somehow relieved.

“We discussed this allegory: if she were a beverage, Tsukimori would be wine.”

—What kind of reaction is she going to show me, I wonder?

“And, by the way, you’d be orange juice.”

Beside me I heard the sound of a pencil lead breaking.

“Ah yeah?”

Usami played with the pencil between her fingers, feigning indifference. However, I didn’t overlook that moment when her cheeks blushed.

After that Usami’s questioning stopped.

Her honest reaction had something that calmed my mind. I had only given her name back then to put them off, but perhaps I had actually revealed my true thoughts which I had been unaware of myself.

At least at that very moment I felt that I liked Usami.

“...by the way.”

I considered our conversation finished, but she still wanted to say something it seemed.

Usami whispered with a serious expression on her face, “I-I’m normal, you know? A normal girl! Not some strange girl like you assumed earlier! I don’t want to be misunderstood, okay?”

I accidentally smiled because of Usami’s lovely words.

Her honesty was very comfortable to me—almost like tasting a glass of delicious orange juice.

I wished I could fall in love with her.

After the monthly class officers’ regular meeting I watched the female officer of my

class leave in a hurry and strolled back to our classroom.

Having reached the empty room, I prepared myself to leave as well. As I was in no club, I had nothing to do at school anymore. What was left was going home and preparing for my part-time job.

When I stood up from my seat, I noticed a university notebook on the floor. I immediately noticed whom it belonged to. Its front page read “Youko Tsukimori”.

I looked around the room, but she wasn’t there. I decided to put it on her desk before leaving.

But just when I was about to do so, I registered a scrap of paper that peeked out from the notebook. I grasped the scrap, thinking nothing of it, and pulled it out.

“...now that’s unexpected,” I unintentionally let out.

It turned out to be a folded A4 report sheet. The caption written on it matched neither the Tsukimori everyone talked of nor my personal image of her.

After making sure nobody was watching, I stowed it away in my bag. I did so because I presumed it would take quite some time to read all of the tightly-written text.

You could say I succumbed to temptation.

No, at that very moment I felt not even a speck of guilt whatsoever. It was but pure curiosity.

I didn’t have anything against wine. To begin with, I couldn’t possibly judge without ever having taken a sip. It’s just that my attachment to the familiar drink won over my wariness of the unfamiliar one.

In short, I was interested in the wine everyone praised so highly.

“Alright, what kind of secret of our idol is going to come to light...?”

I left the classroom as I always did.

It was past 10 P.M. when I returned home after finishing my work at the café.

When I arrived there I had completely forgotten about the sheet. I had been looking forward to reading its contents, but the various stimuli at the café drove its existence into a corner of my memory.

I like to observe people. You might even call it my hobby.

Part of the reason why I chose to work at a café was surely that I simply like coffee, but more than that I found the different types of people you meet there interesting.

A young woman who always takes the same seat and just keeps gazing outside. A man in the prime of his life who changes the girl at his side each visit. The cooled-down relationship of a couple that had been deeply in love just half a year ago. And many more.

It was something that excited my imagination—a favorite pastime of mine.

In reality though, I was no different from Kamogawa and the others. I, too, was just an ordinary 17-year-old teenager. I did not want to know the truth. I simply wanted to enjoy wallowing in my fantasies.

I was in the middle of relaxing, taking a warm bath, when I remembered the sheet I had picked up after school.

With my body still warm I dove onto my bed and unfolded the paper. While holding myself back from hurrying things, I slowly glanced over the title.

“The Murder Recipe”

I felt like I was reading the mystery novel of some popular author. Maybe this was due to the title actually sounding like a novel’s.

A scrap of paper that appeared from the notebook of the person who was on everyone’s lips—Youko Tsukimori.

There seemed to be no end to the rumors dealing with her vivid love life, but her image still remained mostly irreproachable. She was by no means a girl the word “murder” would have suited.

Perhaps it was this fact that piqued my curiosity. Contrasts like this have a sort of magic to them that sucks you in—be it for the good or the bad.

My gaze skimmed over the text, completely absorbed by it. Faithful to its title “The Murder Recipe”, it introduced different ways of killing someone.

I noticed that parts of the text had been erased and corrected, indicating that the recipe had been revised several times. I could virtually sense the breath of the person who wrote down these rather messy characters. It had something vivid to it, so to speak.

While reading on, I discovered something that all of the approaches had in common.

The most important objective appeared to be eliminating the target without getting one’s own hands dirty. It was not a text written by a human who is fond of killing—who sets the act of killing as his highest objective.

“...is she really aiming to become a mystery author?”

These seemed exactly like tricks made for a mystery story. However, they were written rather clumsily and were far from perfect.

To present an example: there was one way of killing titled “The Feigned Traffic Accident Murder Recipe”. The content was most simple.

- On a road over a steep mountain pass.
- Disturb the driver somehow.
- Make him lose control of the steering wheel.

It was written in bullet points like this. Additional remarks like “Phone the driver in order to make him lose concentration?” or “Put some hindrance on the road?” were very sparsely added.

As can be seen, the grade of completion was very low. Maybe she was still in the stage of collecting together various ideas, trying to perfect it?

The risk was reduced to a minimum, but I didn’t think the plan was likely to succeed either. I could see she tried, but this was one weak plan if she was to really kill someone.

I dropped the murder recipe onto my desk.

Having had high expectations, the letdown was great. The all too childish contents of the recipe had killed my interest.

“This just spoiled my after-bath-bliss.”

After complaining aloud, I reached out for my bookshelf to remove the bad taste by reading a real mystery novel.

“...no, hold on a sec.”

However, I stopped my hand and started thinking. A new thought lifted my spirits to new heights again.

Who was the owner of this “Murder Recipe”?

It was Youko Tsukimori!

What if, purely hypothetically, she had written this because she seriously wanted to kill someone...? That thought made the clumsy text feel rather realistic at once.

Leaving aside the reason for now, there was a person whom Tsukimori wanted to die and she had desperately written a murder plan to make it happen.

Tsukimori had! That perfect, stylish, beautiful, intelligent “Tsukimori” who was adored by everyone!

And she had edited such an immature murder plan over and over.

“...now, aren’t we cute?”

If this guess turned out to be true, I’d almost become a big fan of hers.

My imagination was put in motion. I started puzzling over all kinds of questions, like the person she wanted to kill, her potential motive and her hidden personality. I kept playing this game until the sky started to dawn in the east.

The next morning I went to school later than I usually did.

By the time I entered the classroom, most of my classmates were already present. Of course, Tsukimori was among them as well.

While walking to my seat, I secretly glanced at her. She was putting the things in her desk in order. At least to others it looked like such a perfectly normal action.

Not to me.

“Good morning, Tsukimori.” I greeted her as always.

She stopped peeking into her desk, tilted her head and looked at me while using her little finger to brush her elegant, long hair out of her face. “Good morning, Nonomiyakun.”

She showed me her mature smile as always.

Usually, our conversation would have ended right there. We knew each other only well enough to exchange greetings.

“Are you looking for something?”

However, that morning I didn’t want to let it end there. My curiosity was vexing me, for I suspected that she might be searching for the “Murder Recipe”.

I intensively stared at her, not wanting to miss the slightest stir.

“No, I am just sorting my desk.”

Sadly, her smile was left unchanged.

I told her, “I see,” and headed to my own seat, while thinking to myself that reality was so boring compared to imagination.

“But...,” she suddenly called me from behind, “why did you think I was searching for something?”

I was desperate not to break into a broad smile.

It was a feeling as though prey had hopped readily into my trap. Whatever her sentiments were, I started getting in high spirits just from the expectation of some amusing developments.

“No, I’m afraid there’s no particular reason,” I turned around towards her, playing dumb. “But let me return that question: why do you ask?”

I decided to probe lightly.

“I had no particular reason, either.”

“I see.”

Before me was only her unchanged mature smile. I felt the desire to make that smile freeze, but I didn’t intend to get to the core just yet. I thought it was best to keep my trump card for the very end.

“But if...,” I began, “if you are troubled, feel free to ask me for help.”

“What’s the matter, Nonomiya-kun? I don’t remember you being this gentle?”

“I’m gentler than you believe, that’s for sure.”

“I beg your pardon. I’ll be sure to remember that then.”

“Of course the primary motivation would be getting a girl of outstanding popularity like you indebted to me, though.”

Tsukimori giggled.

“Thank you. I will directly consult you then, Nonomiya-kun, should I ever be troubled.”

Tsukimori smiled with her almond eyes half closed.

It didn’t look like she *wasn’t* scheming something. I won’t deny the influence of my wishful thinking on this assessment, though.

Our conversation ended because our class teacher, Ukai, had appeared in the classroom.

My mood was quite good that day. Kamogawa and his comrades were annoying when they came to question me about my conversation with Tsukimori in the following break, but I considered it a good harvest because I had discovered how thrilling and amusing it was to talk to her.

Well, it was just me savoring the thrill produced by my own fantasies, though.

Still, it was much better than a boring reality.

Without any progress or new information, my peaceful daily routine went on and, before I knew it, two weeks had passed since finding the murder recipe.

As there wasn't anything to stir up my imagination, my excitement subsided and I was about to forget the very existence of the recipe.

Because I had kept holding back my trump card, the game had stopped slowly and quietly. It was a truly pathetic situation.

However, a change occurred all of a sudden.

Perhaps...the game had not even started yet.

I went to school as always, and the classroom was ever noisy. But Tsukimori was nowhere in sight. Her seat was empty.

I was puzzled, but the answer wasn't long in coming.

“Hey, Nonomiya! Have you heard?”

It was Kamogawa.

“Can't say I have.”

Of course I had no idea what he was talking about because his sentence lacked the object.

“Someone from Tsukimori's family is dead.”

I felt my heartbeat accelerate.

“Who?” I asked while suppressing the arising excitement.

“Her dad, it seems. It was a traffic accident. Youko-san has my fullest sympathies...,” answered Usami with a sad face.

“Really, I feel sorry for her. To lose one’s father at this age, that’s...”

Unlike his usual behavior, even Kamogawa showed a mournful mien. That must be the normal reaction.

“...Indeed. Let’s all support her.”

However, I harbored different emotions from the others. Youko Tsukimori, traffic accident, death—these keywords led me straight to the murder recipe.

I desperately suppressed the grin that was about to flash over my face.

It’s getting interesting.

[Live]

The first lesson was English, but I don't remember anything of it. I was pondering the accident of Youko Tsukimori's father.

I also played with the thought of browsing some news sites on my mobile phone—hidden from the eyes of the teacher, of course—but I decided against it because I was known as a fairly well-behaving student. I kept telling myself that I was keeping the best for last and spent a painful hour like this.

The very moment the English lesson ended, I rushed out of the classroom, fired up for details about the accident, and headed straight to the library room.

It should have today's newspaper, and since there was a casualty, there had to be an article about it.

And just as I had expected, there was an article that dealt with the accident in question. I was a bit disappointed when I started reading; there was an article, sure, but it was a short one and written very briefly in a corner of the local news page.

However, as I read on, my heartbeat became faster. In the text I found some of the keywords I was looking for.

“...on his way home on a mountain pass...”

“...a sharp curve with poor sight distance...”

“...there have been casualties before...”

“...too much speed due to the slope...”

There were several text passages that reminded me of the “Feigned Traffic Accident Murder Recipe” as noted in the murder recipe. I couldn't help getting excited at the thought that “Youko Tsukimori had executed her murder plan.”

...and also, I couldn't help feeling a chill run down my spine when I imagined the accident with that thought in mind.

Just as important were the unwritten facts.

The article wouldn't have been this tiny if the Police had considered the possibility of murder. Similarly, I wouldn't have remained oblivious until arriving at school.

Had I gotten something fatally wrong?

The plan looked childish at first glance, like an uncertain trick that relied on several shaky elements.

But maybe she executed that plan exactly because of those flaws?

Who would presume the existence of such a clumsy murder plan?

Who would see a schemed murder in something that looked like nothing but an accident?

And as the facts showed, the police were convinced that it was simply a traffic accident. The same applied to my classmates; everyone considered Tsukimori a poor girl who had lost her father in an accident.

I bet even the victim himself wouldn't have dreamed of her being a murderer.

Nor would I have, if I hadn't known of the murder recipe.

Probably it wouldn't even have been much of a problem if the plan had failed. It was based on luck anyway; if you look only at the probability, it was unlikely to succeed in the first place.

But exactly that aspect was the point of the murder recipe.

There were multiple plans written in it that were all dependent on random external circumstances. So wasn't she expecting them to fail from the very beginning?

Tsukimori's target was her father—someone who was always close to her and, hence, gave her countless opportunities to kill him. It may be a coarse expression, but you could say that “even a bad shot hits the mark given enough tries.”

Tsukimori certainly did not intend to just pull it off as fast as possible. She merely wanted him to die sooner or later. I guess that's how she felt about it.

She did not, however, want to get busted for it.

I had noticed from the time I had first read the recipe that the plan was not designed chiefly for killing, but rather for living on normally after executing it.

In that case, the results made it evident. Tsukimori had done it—

—the perfect murder.

I couldn't help thinking so.

Of course, this was all just a product of my mind and far too baseless to be considered certain.

I knew her no better than my classmates. When it came to her, Kamogawa was actually much more knowledgeable than I. These thoughts were merely an extension to my usual “imagine and enjoy” pastime and not something upright like “solving a case”.

However, for some reason I just couldn't call my guess a cheap delusion and call it quits.

The homeroom after that day's classes was about Tsukimori's father's death.

“I think everyone knows of the passing of Tsukimori's father. A funeral is being held tomorrow afternoon, which I am going to attend. Thus, the fifth lesson, biology, is going to be self-study.”

When the word “self-study” left our class teacher Ukai's mouth, a wave of joy went through the ranks of my classmates.

“Hey, that's called *tactless*, you know? Empathize a little with Tsukimori who has just lost one of her parents!” Ukai rebuked us—not with an especially strong tone, but the classroom became silent. It was a heavy silence.

Apparently content with the unexpected contemplation of his students, he closed this

matter.

“Moreover, the class officers are required to come along to the funeral as the representatives of the class. I’m counting on you. Okay, homeroom’s closed.”

Right when Ukai was about to finish: “Sensei!” Usami raised her hand, “The female class officer is Youko herself.”

“Aah, you’re right. Well then, Usami, may I ask you?”

“Ah, yes.”

“The other one was you, Nonomiya, right? I expect you to be there.”

“Yes.”

I nodded calmly and secretly grinned to myself.

It was exactly what I had wished for. I had not even dreamed that I would have the chance to attend the funeral officially like this.

Actually, after reading the article in the library I had pondered about how I might be able to go to the funeral, because I had wanted to obtain more information on Tsukimori. While I had reckoned that the ceremonies would be beyond reach, I had thought that I could at least attend the wake of the deceased.

“Only the two of you?! That’s not fair!”

After making sure that Ukai had left, Kamogawa scowled alternately at Usami and me.

“Who was the irresponsible guy that nominated me for class officer at the beginning of the term again?”

Just this once I was grateful for that irresponsible personality of his, though.

“Dunno? I’m a man who doesn’t look back at times gone past.”

“Your irresponsibility deserves admiration. In a bad sense.”

“It’s an honor!!”

I could only smile wryly at Kamogawa’s haughty answer.

“Kamogawa, you brute! Didn’t you listen to Ukai-sensei? You’re being tactless...” pouted a serious Usami on noticing his easy-going attitude.

“This is a misunderstanding, Usami. I am merely worried about a fellow classmate who has lost a dear one, you know?” Kamogawa assured us with a meek expression.

“That’s a lie. It’s clear that you only want to meet Youko-san because of your ulterior motives!” claimed Usami.

“No, idiot! I would never have ulterior motives! I simply wish to soothe Tsukimori in these hard times,” he objected instantly, “Well, but sure, I would not be averse to her falling in love with me in the process, heh!”

“You really are a brute, Kamogawa!” Usami seemed completely dumbfounded.

As was I: “Kamogawa, perk your ears: that’s what we call an ulterior motive.”

“Ahaa, I see! You never stop learning, do you?” Kamogawa evaded my remark with feigned ignorance. There’s no cure for a Kamogawa.

“...I hope you don’t have an ulterior motive too, Nonomiya?”

She realized that Kamogawa was beyond hope and set me as her new target.

“Of course not. I am going to the funeral ceremony because I’m a class officer, not because I wish for it myself,” I put on a powerless smile. “Also, I don’t like the gloomy air at funerals. To be honest, I would rather not go.”

“Right? I knew you weren’t like Kamogawa!”

Usami flashed a brilliant smile as if she herself had been praised.

“Your attitudes towards me and Nonomiya are way too different! I sense discrimination! If I were from America, I would take you to court right now!”

“But you’re Japanese from head to toe. And it’s the difference between your daily behaviors that distinguishes you from Nonomiya. Blame yourself?”

While of a completely different nature, I had an ulterior motive too. To tell the truth, I loved funerals. Especially because you could sneak a peek at all kinds of humans.

I was looking forward to the next day's funeral with the same sentiments as going to a concert of my favorite artist.

After ending the third lesson, Usami and I were brought to the funeral home in Ukai's car. There was not one cloud in the broad blue sky outside the window.

During the ride I was able to gather some details about Tsukimori's family environment from Ukai.

Her family consisted of her two parents and herself, their only child. This was actually quite surprising to me because her mature behavior had led me to believe that she'd have someone to look after, such as a younger sibling.

Apparently her father had been the head of a construction design company. Since my own father worked at a bank near that company, I planned on asking him about it afterward.

As soon as we had arrived at the funeral home and had gone through the formalities at the entrance, we proceeded to the hall that was marked with a sign reading "Tsukimori."

A lot of flower offerings were being made, so that the line led out of the hall. It was as though I was watching the scene of an arcade that had installed a new game machine.

The dim, wide room was packed with people in mourning clothes. The altar seemed much more magnificent to me than the ones in any past funerals I had attended.

We sat down in the seats that had been prepared for common attendants and waited patiently for the beginning of the ceremony.

My eyes searched for Tsukimori and found her sitting near the altar where the relatives had gathered. She was comforting the woman beside her who hung her head, supporting her and stroking her back.

From the looks of it, I suspected it could be her mother. She was a beautiful lady who resembled Tsukimori.

I was, however, surprised at how composed Tsukimori apparently was.

It was then that I recalled that I had once asked Usami why all the girls called Tsukimori with a “-san” added to her name. Her answer had been: “Youko-san may be the same age as us, but doesn’t she kind of look and behave very maturely? So basically, someone started calling her Youko-san, which then led to the current state.”

Indeed. I was almost unsure of who the mother and who the daughter was.

“...I’m so sorry for Youko-san.”

I looked to my side and found Usami with watery eyes. She not only gave the feeling of “born to be a little sister,” but actually had an elder brother.

“Come on, don’t cry,” I said as I produced a handkerchief.

“Just look at how she’s keeping calm though she’s bound to be sad in reality! If it was me, I wouldn’t be able to...”

Usami seized the handkerchief from my hands and rubbed her eyes with it. Certainly, Usami would probably cry her lungs out.

But I was reluctant to agree with her that Tsukimori was saddened about her father’s death.

If I was right on Tsukimori wishing for his death...then she was pleased rather than sorrowful, because in that case this funeral was actually an event to celebrate the success of her murder plan.

As time went by, the seats of the hall gradually filled and before I knew it, the whole hall was painted black.

From every direction I could hear whispers that had been lowered in respect of the solemn mood that accompanied funeral homes. I decided to listen attentively to that chattering as a combined means of killing time and gathering information.

I focused on the conversation of two women that were meekly talking in the row right before me. I would have loved to jot it down!

Their chatter was interrupted midway. I would have preferred to listen a little longer, but there was no helping it since the ceremony had begun.

The sutra conducted by the priest resounded clearly throughout the hall.

The solemn mood set my mind at rest and thus produced the perfect environment for indulging myself in my thoughts. I chose to replay the conversation I had just heard in my mind and put the data in order:

Her father's reputation was extremely good.

First they had talked about his looks, which wasn't too surprising, considering he was Tsukimori's father. A glance at the picture on the altar showed that he had looked like some performer and made me comprehend why he was popular with them.

Then, they continued with his company's and his family's economic situation. While it was a S.M.E., the business went smoothly and their private living standard was quite high as well. Apparently, their home had been newly built two years ago, with a complex design as one would expect from the director of a construction design business.

Lastly, they had talked about his family itself. Both father and mother had been fairly sociable and on good terms with their neighbors. The women had also raised the subject of Tsukimori. She was valued as a beautiful daughter with good manners.

I let out a sigh.

Admittedly, I was happy that I could get my hands on new information, but there had been nothing that could ignite my fantasies. The newspaper had gotten me too excited and caused me to have too high expectations of the funeral.

I breathed in the silent air of the hall.

Pulling myself together, I decided to give myself over to the tranquil mood of the room again. It was a promising funeral, after all! It would be a waste not to take advantage of the occasion and spy on some human relationships.

No need to rush things. The longer this game of ours lasted, the better.

When I turned my gaze towards the area near the altar, I noticed that Tsukimori's mother had broken down in tears.

Her wailing was apparently also the reason why the women in my surroundings provided me with a background of sobbing voices. By the way, Usami was still crying as well.

However, there were no tears in Tsukimori's eyes.

Her gaze was captivatingly fixed on the altar.

Because her black mourning dress emphasized the brightness of her skin, it almost seemed as though Tsukimori herself was gleaming. More than the deceased man himself, more than the richly decorated altar or the whining mother or everyone else in the room, it was Tsukimori and her silent appearance that stood out.

To me, Tsukimori appeared like the moon late at night.

Stunningly beautiful.

It was time for the coffin's departure. While sounding its loud and sober horn, the hearse departed before the eyes of the people in black.

The relatives of the deceased, Tsukimori among them, left the hall temporarily and headed to the crematory. The three of us decided that we would wait for her return so that we could at least exchange a few words with her.

"You two must be hungry, right? Let me treat you to lunch today. But keep it a secret from the others, okay?"

"Yay! You hear this, Nonomiya?" Usami rejoiced without any restraint. This must be one of those infamous mood swings.

Well, being fond of the word "secret", I also gladly accepted his offer.

Moments later, we were slurping ramen in a shop near the funeral home.

"—You two may not be quite aware of it yet, but death is an inescapable part of life," Ukai said suddenly, his glasses fogged by the steam of his soup. "Saying this may be tactless towards Tsukimori, but still I would like you to treasure the impressions of this very uncommon and sad happening: the passing of a comrade's father."

Usami nodded earnestly, her mouth stuffed with noodles like a squirrel.

“Indeed. I was reminded that there is a limit to our lives—and also that this makes life all the more valuable.” Being in my class teacher’s company, I chose my words carefully when relaying my impressions.

“You’re amazing, Nonomiya,” Usami praised me with wide eyes after gulping down her noodles.

“Of course. Unlike you, I wasn’t crying all the way through the ceremony.”

“I-I had lots of thoughts crossing my mind, too!”

“For instance?”

“Eh? Ah, um, that I’m sorry for her...”

“What else?”

“...T-That I’m sorry for her?”

“I heard that already.”

“N-No, don’t get me wrong! In truth I have been thinking about much more than this, it’s just that I can’t put it into words as well as you!”

Ukai laughed from listening to our conversation.

“Well, well, let’s settle down with the conclusion that both of you had your respective thoughts, okay? Nonomiya was more analytical and Usami more emotional.” Ukai went between and solved it like a teacher.

—Life’s interesting because there’s a limit to it. The thrill of not knowing when it ends is what gives you the awareness of being alive.

At first glance it might seem contradictory that death, the antithesis of life, highlights the value of life, but it actually makes sense. I even conceived the idea that most things in the world might work in a similar way.

At that very moment, enthralled by the risky murder recipe—I was most definitely living.

We greeted Tsukimori when she came back to the hall.

Ukai first expressed his deepest sympathy before assuring her: “Don’t be concerned about school. Take your time and return when you’re comfortable.”

“Thank you very much for your thoughtfulness. However, I have it in mind to attend school normally from the day after tomorrow because I think it will help me to distract myself.” She smiled weakly. “...I am a little anxious about leaving my mother alone at home, as she has been hit especially hard, but her siblings and my father's siblings both assured me that they will be supporting her for a while.”

Tsukimori seemed exhausted. From the looks of it, she hadn’t been sleeping properly.

But while knowing it was pretty tactless, I couldn’t help being under the impression that her white face, now accentuated by her mourning dress, looked even more sensual than at school.

“I see. At any rate, be sure not to over-strain yourself and feel free to consult me anytime.” Ukai patted her on the shoulder.

“Thank you for coming as well, Chizuru, Nonomiya-kun.”

“Everyone in the class is worried about you.”

“I feel blessed.”

“Youko-san...”

Usami was on the verge of tears again, apparently moved by Tsukimori’s brave behavior.

I poked her head and said: “Shouldn’t you calm down a bit? You wanted to express your condolences properly, right?”

“...Yeah,” Usami nodded teary-eyed. “Um...Youko-san, it will be hard on you, but... i-it will whe hard on yhew, but...”

Usami began weeping mid-sentence because she couldn’t bear it anymore.

Tsukimori didn’t hesitate to embrace Usami’s round head and comforted her, “Thank you, Chizuru. I’m very happy that you are so worried about me.” While stroking her

head like a loving sister, she murmured, "...I think you can consider yourself happy if you have someone that worries about you." After that, she whispered her thanks to Usami again and again.

The gentle and fragile girl at that moment did not look in the least like someone who would plan a murder to me.

[Confession]

Two days later, when Youko Tsukimori came to school again, even students from other classes came in crowds to our classroom to catch a glimpse of her.

One after another they expressed their condolences, showing nothing but expressions of pity.

Kamogawa's voice could be heard from the human ring that had formed around the center of the room.

"School without you is like a night without the moon! Please Tsukimori, cheer up and light my footsteps in the dark as tenderly as you used to do!"

Oh how I would love to see him stumble in the dark and get stuck in a gutter.

A group of guys, Kamogawa among them, were trying to appear appealing, talking wildly to her. Taking advantage of a girl's weakness might be a usual and practical strategy, but I just couldn't endure watching their pathetic and honorless behavior.

"You're quite the poet, aren't you Kamogawa-kun? Thank you for worrying about me."

However, Tsukimori dealt with each of them with utmost politeness, not showing the slightest frown—no, even smiling. Once again I came to understand why she was so popular.

Most people wouldn't be able to behave as she did. At least I wouldn't have been able to. After all, I was already annoyed and I was just watching her.

As soon as the wave of visitors broke off, Tsukimori stood up and, for some reason, headed towards me with a smile on her face.

"It's quite unusual for you to approach me spontaneously."

"But you came to my father's funeral, didn't you? I wanted to say thanks." She sat down on Usami's empty chair and smiled cheerfully at me. "So, thanks for coming, Nonomiya-kun."

“No, it’s nothing that would deserve your appreciation. I merely attended as a representative for the class.”

“But it is. I was somehow relieved at seeing you being as laid-back as usual.”

“Oh, I’m sorry for being such a cold-hearted guy. I was worried about you in my own way, though, you know? Too bad you didn’t notice,” I said and shrugged uncomfortably, whereupon Tsukimori laughed cheerfully: “I don’t think of you like that!”

“Have things settled down at home?”

“There are still a lot of things that need to be taken care of, but for the time being, yes.”

“I see. You must have experienced some troublesome days, I guess. Well, school must have its troublesome aspects too, for someone as popular as you.”

Tsukimori shook her head, making her soft hair sway.

“I am very grateful that everyone is so worried about me.”

“It’s nice when others feel concerned about you, indeed, but there are limits that have to be respected, right? Aren’t those fanatic fans of yours a bother? Especially Kamogawa. Or Kamogawa.”

“I’m actually quite fond of that cute side of boys.”

I tried to find out her true thoughts by agitating her, but Tsukimori’s smile remained unchanged like an iron wall.

“Your mature behavior is remarkable.”

“I am happy that you view me like that, Nonomiya-kun.”

She accepted even my rather baffled words with a happy tone.

“—Nonomiya-kun,” Tsukimori said my name all of a sudden, “do you remember your promise?”

“...Promise?”

I don't remember ever making a promise to her.

"If I'm troubled—"

"—Ah, I see."

In the midst of her reminding me, I recalled a certain conversation I had with her one morning.

"Right, that promise."

"Well, I promised indeed. Ask for whatever you like, as long as I can help you with it."

It was a seed I had sowed myself, but deep in my heart I hoped that she would not have a bothersome request.

"It is something I would rather not talk about in the classroom," explained Tsukimori with a subdued voice so faint that no one else other than me could hear her.

The next instant, I was tense from tip to toe.

"...I'll be waiting for you in the library after school," she whispered and left the classroom elegantly with her hair streaming out behind her.

The palm of my hand was drenched in sweat. Apparently, I was more tense than I had thought.

Her suspicious attitude had instantly reminded me of the murder recipe.

I sensed curiosity rising in me and hoped to get to the core of this affair at last. But at the same time, I was also alarmed because nobody, naturally including Tsukimori, should have known that the murder recipe was in my hands. My tension was proof that wariness exceeded curiosity, I suppose.

"What if Tsukimori knows that I have her murder recipe...?" I thought to myself, picturing an unhappy scenario.

Her father's funeral had been conducted without incident; she had become a character akin to the heroine of some dramatic play and was on everybody's lips. Could one of her plans possibly fail in the first place? Looking at how she had everything, that was

the impression I got.

The only two things that were in her way were the murder recipe that had gone lost and I, since I knew what was written in it.

As soon as she got rid of these two unsafe elements, she would have conducted the perfect crime and obtain her own “ideal world”.

...perhaps she was planning on killing me in due time.

I gulped and my heartbeat got faster.

And then—I laughed.

I didn't want to die. And I also had to admit that it was quite an absurd thought, but: I was intrigued. I was intrigued by how she would hunt me down.

Where else in my environment could I find such a stimulus? Furthermore, the opponent was Youko Tsukimori—I couldn't have wished for anyone better.

I was convinced: this was the best time I'd had in the seventeen years of my life so far.

I took a deep breath and stepped into the library.

The room was filled with the scent of paper as dry as fallen leaves. It was not a smell I disliked. At other times, I might have started leisurely browsing the library, but not now.

Even though I was moving leisurely, my eyes were restlessly searching for Tsukimori.

And before long, I found her.

She was sitting further inside at a desk for studying, reading a book with an elegant cover.

As classes had already ended and this was a library, it was already silent anyway, but that silence was even stronger around Tsukimori, as if I had entered a different realm.

Bewitched by her pure appearance that made her hard to approach, I just stood there holding my breath for a while.

Her long-lashed eyes closed and opened softly as she blinked, and from time to time she led her hand to the edge of the page and smoothly turned to the next one. Her profile looked like the finest glass work, though definitely not created by man but a miracle brought forth by god. “I would be a rich man if I could cut out this scene and frame it,” I thought.

I confirmed that nobody was there except for Tsukimori and me.

“Once again, I’m sure the recent days have been hard for you—,” I leaned against a book shelf as I addressed her, “—losing your father in an *accident* and all.”

Tsukimori clapped her book shut and slowly turned towards me.

“Yes, especially for my mother. I have never seen her that down-hearted.”

She gave a weak, tired laugh.

“How about you?”

“I’m sorry, but I have not recovered enough to talk about it yet.”

Tsukimori shook her head with a troubled mien. It was a rather noncommittal answer.

“No, it was a rude question on my part. I beg your pardon.”

I bowed my head.

“By the way, what is your request?” I brought up the main topic after a breath, “You specially called me out to the library for this, so I should think it’s something quite delicate?”

“You told me to ask for your help if I am troubled.”

“Yeah, and you answered that you would consult me directly.”

“Exactly. That’s why I would like to get back to your offer, Nonomiya-kun. Please lend me a hand.”

Then she spoke as if humming a tune:

“I want you to go out with me.”

Her completely unexpected words made my mind go blank.

To be sure I chose to ask, “Where to?” but Tsukimori only bewilderedly replied: “You aren’t funny,” and shook her neat chin left and right.

“I suppose I’m not the person to criticize you, having already asked a tactless question just earlier, but you do realize that you lost your father only some days ago?”

Unlike Tsukimori I had to feign composure; I was observing all of her movements with the greatest attention in order to read her intentions while my brain ran full throttle.



“Do you want to say I am imprudent?”

“If you talk in extremes, yes.”

“Then you misunderstand me! Precisely because my father has passed away, I thought that I’d need someone for support. Isn’t it romantic if you call it ‘the support of my heart’? I am not as strong as everyone believes, you know?”

Indeed, this was a good reason, but there were still too many points that didn’t match.

“Then, why does it have to be me? I fail to understand why a popular girl like you would choose someone like me.”

Tsukimori giggled, “I didn’t know you were so gauche, Nonomiya-kun. It seems you don’t understand a woman’s heart at all if you ask for a reason why she confessed.”

I found her attitude a little irritating.

“But you don’t seem to understand a man’s heart at all, either. At least I’m not so simple as to have no doubts whatsoever when a beauty asks me to go out with her all of a sudden. There’s always a catch to attractive deals, isn’t there?” I sneered at her as payback.

“Is that so? I was sure that boys never feel bad being confessed to by a girl?”

The certainty in her tone made me lose my words for a moment.

“Indeed...we are simple enough to be happy about it, but the reply is a different matter.”

I didn’t want to admit it, but she was right. I unintentionally prided myself on the confession that everyone would envy me for. Was it the difference in our experience points? My chances were awfully worse when it came to love.

“Is there a girl you are fond of, Nonomiya-kun?” Tsukimori suddenly asked—as easily as a waitress who confirms a customer’s order.

“There isn’t.”

Usami’s face came to mind for a split second, but I neither liked her enough to mention her distinctly, nor was I straightforward enough to answer honestly.

“Is there a girl you are going out with, then?”

“...isn't the order of questions a bit awry? Usually it would be the other way around, wouldn't it?”

“Is that so? Maybe you are going out with someone you don't love?” she answered with a wondering mien.

“...I think I finally understand why the guys say that all the rumors about you might be true.”

I shrugged over-exaggeratedly.

“Those rumors are nothing but that, rumors, and you are not the type of person that is swayed by them, Nonomiya-kun.”

“What makes you so sure? Even I watch my step if I hear some bad rumors, you know?”

“If you want, I can tell you which of them are true and which are not? In return—”

“—I hope you don't want to make dating the condition.”

“Our chemistry is right!”

Tsukimori showed no sign of timidity, instead she even smiled brightly.

“As if I'd ever accept such an unfair condition!” This time it was me who was taken aback. “...I didn't know you were this kind of girl.”

She made me dance to her tune from start to finish. All the possible replies I had simulated in advance for this conversation were going to waste one after another.

“This is my way of paying respect to you, Nonomiya-kun! You are the person I wish to go out with. I think there is no point in showing you only a superficial side.”

“I'm sorry about your respect, but haven't you thought about the possibility that I might refuse?”

“I am ready to accept some amount of damage in order to obtain what I want. If you are afraid of getting hurt, you won't obtain what you really desire. Well, revealing a

few of my cards does not even count as damage anyway.”

“Exceptional self-confidence, indeed! No wonder that the girls of our grade add a ‘-san’ to your name.”

“I didn’t know you were such an uptight person either. I was rather sure you were the type to let things take their course.”

“I’m much more sensible than you may think. And a little contrary, too. And I’m definitely not daring enough to get myself involved in affairs that make no sense to me or that I can’t agree to.”

“Aren’t you just averse to doing things you are not interested in?”

“I won’t deny that! At any rate, if I go out with you, I won’t have my peace any more. I’m simply not leading my life actively enough as to take to attracting attention, that’s all.”

“It’s a shame that you are so stubborn, Nonomiya-kun...,” she said and fell silent.

We shared a painful silence.

Even the shouts of the sports clubs from the grounds seemed loud inside the soundless library and I heard the rustling of her skirt all too clearly when Tsukimori crossed her slender legs the other way around.

Tsukimori’s gaze was listlessly wandering about in the air, hesitating about something.

Even such trivial gestures looked like a scene of a movie, sweetening the time until her next words and keeping me from getting bored.

Then I saw her lips move calmly.

“—if I tell you the reason why I chose you, will you be more open towards my request?”

I gulped down. In my imagination she got straight to the point and proclaimed that the

reason was that I had the murder recipe.

Such an answer would naturally be quite absurd, but as Tsukimori seemed to be an unpredictable person, I couldn't deem it impossible any more. Tsukimori's hidden character was bold, determined, and outstandingly clever on top of it.

That was the kind of girl approaching me. I couldn't help but suspect some kind of catch in her request to go out with me.

“—More than now,” I replied, choosing my words carefully.

I had hardly finished speaking when she squinted one of her almond eyes and smiled mischievously.

“Because I like your looks. It would be even better if you weren't a quibbler.”

Her reply caught me so flat-footed that I would have liked to fall on the floor, but I contained myself and launched a counterattack.

“What a coincidence. I also think you're not half-bad, save for your personality.”

“We would make a well-matched couple then, wouldn't we?”

“In the sense of awful, sure.”

Her constantly playing around with me had completely cooled me down.

Suspecting Youko Tsukimori to be a “father murderer” suddenly felt terribly idiotic and embarrassing.

Indeed, Tsukimori was a determined and bold girl, but I also knew that she was definitely not foolish. Even if she hypothetically had considered her father an eyesore, she would have found many other ways of getting rid of him without choosing the means of “murder”.

In the first place, could someone who had committed murder remain that composed? She was a peculiar girl, but I couldn't sense even a shred of shadiness or malicious emotion in her.

Suddenly——something touched my bangs. I reflexively jumped backward.

“—I’m sorry.”

After taking a look, I noticed that Tsukimori had stood up from her chair and had stretched her smooth white fingers towards me.

“Your hair looked so beautiful that I wanted to touch it very badly.”

Tsukimori gave me a bewitching smile, beautiful like the light of the moon.

—A shiver ran down my spine.

To me, that girl didn’t seem to be from the same world.

“Please think about it seriously,” Tsukimori said and moved toward the exit.

While she passed me, her hair stroked my cheek and left behind a strong scent of roses.

Even though I had planned to learn more about her, I now understood Youko Tsukimori even less than before.

Then I recalled how Kamogawa had compared her to wine.

Indeed.

I was intoxicated by Youko Tsukimori’s fragrance.

[In The Café]

All of a sudden Tsukimori came to my desk and said, with a smile as warm as sunbeams shining through the leaves of a tree and a voice as soft as a gentle summer breeze:

"Shall we go then, Nonomiya-kun?"

Time stopped in the noisy classroom. At least, my train of thought did.

Everyone suspended what he or she was doing and looked over to us. Usami was the first to regain time.

"...eh? Youko-san? Are you tagging along with Nonomiya? Why? Eeh?"

Her bewilderment made her look like one of those automatons that jump out of striking clocks every hour.

"I wanted to pay the café Nonomiya-kun works at a visit since I heard it's very comfortable there. And as you know, I have been quite busy lately, so I was a little tired and thought about relaxing there while enjoying a cup of tea. Well, that's why *I asked* Nonomiya-kun!"

Tsukimori was obviously taking into consideration that we were being watched by our classmates.

"Is that true, Nonomiya?"

I had already expected that I would be the next target to be questioned.

"It is."

Thus, I somehow managed not to reveal my discontent.

"Maybe I should join you..."

I almost blacked out upon hearing her murmur. Tsukimori alone was already enough trouble—I couldn't manage both of them at the same time.

"Aren't your club activities waiting for you?"

Usami was in the volleyball club. She was gifted with strength in her arms that didn't suit her small body: her spikes made the guys look old. I remembered all too well how relieved I was to be on the same team after witnessing her spike during PE.

"I-I'll skip!"

"Don't. Didn't you say only recently that you were on the brink of becoming a regular player? It would be foolish to skip your club activities during such an important period."

Usami pressed her lips into a line and grumbled with a frown.

"Let's go together some other time, Chizuru. I will memorize where the café is for you, today. Okay?"

Tsukimori admonished her gently like a caring sister, whereupon Usami obediently nodded, "Okay."

One problem solved. I then went on getting rid of the remaining issues.

"It's really just you who's coming, right? If the whole bunch were to come along, I'd have to refuse because that would only cause the café trouble."

That was a prompt. I indicated to Tsukimori that I would only give my consent if she cleared that condition.

"Don't worry, our classmates are so kind, they would never cause anyone trouble," she ensured with a ladylike smile, "See you tomorrow, everyone."

She elegantly waved her hand at her classmates.

They would have jumped at that chance for sure. The guys, among them Kamogawa, and the girls who admired Tsukimori put their disappointment clearly on display. But not one of them would even think of betraying angelic Youko Tsukimori's trust.

But equally, I was not capable enough to do something against the situation she had induced. I had no choice but to unwillingly go along with her.

Tsukimori walked with light steps towards the front gate.

"What are you up to?" I asked her delicate back, without hiding my bad mood.

Tsukimori turned around, making her long hair flutter in the wind.

"I am so curious about the café you work at," she said, without hiding her good mood.

"Answer me! You should know that I don't like standing out."

"Which is why I tried to prevent a commotion, didn't I?"

"That doesn't change the fact that we attracted attention."

"Well, tough luck."

"And whose fault is that...?" I was irritated by her out-and-out undaunted behavior.
"Who told you that I work at a café anyway?"

"I heard it from rumors!"

"Don't lie."

It was well-known that I work part-time somewhere, but I hadn't told anyone at school that I was working at a café.

"What are you after?"

"What do you think I am, Nonomiya-kun? It is not strange at all to desire to learn more about the person in my heart, is it? This is what you call a pure girl's heart."

"You claim to be a pure girl? Laughable. Let me assert this for you: you are nowhere near as harmless as that."

I sneered.

"You know, looking so mature can be a real bother at such times. I am still just a seventeen-year-old girl. Besides, I have only recently lost my father, so I think you ought to be gentler to me, Nonomiya-kun," pouted Tsukimori. I was surprised that she could make such childish expressions, too.

But that was as far as it went. Of course I felt sorry for her, but in the end it was still

none of my business.

"See you tomorrow."

I accelerated my pace and put some distance between me and Tsukimori.

"Where are you going? There's the back gate."

"Unlike you, I commute by bicycle and not by train. If you can keep up with my speed, I shall take the special trouble and guide you to the café?" I was deliberately cold. I couldn't be bothered to adjust to others. And I cared even less to have someone enter my territory without authorization.

"Yes, let's go with that. I just hope my back will not hurt from it, but well, I have always wanted do that once."

However, Tsukimori was even less harmless than I had expected. Before I knew it, she was walking next to me.

"...what are you thinking?"

"I have always wanted to do that at least once! Riding a bicycle à deux."

"When did I say I'd let you?"

"Don't worry. I should not be too heavy."

"That wasn't the question."

I was annoyed. As she showed no restraint I decided on saying my piece without restraint as well.

"I admit that I should be gentler to you as you've just lost your father. However, I don't feel like dancing to your tune like the others, not in the least. Not everyone is considerate towards you, keep that in mind. At least now that I know your true nature, I might still feel sympathy but I am certainly not favorable towards you," I rebuked her.

"Mmm! That's how my Nonomiya-kun has to be," Tsukimori nodded strongly, making a somewhat contented face. "I love this unashamed attitude."

My words had achieved the exact opposite effect. Wanting to put her off, I accidentally attracted her all the more.

Seeing my loss for words, she showed me her occasional big-sister-like smile.

"Won't you give me a chance? I have realized by now that my confession yesterday was overhasty! Just like you don't know how I really am, I don't know you well yet, either. I think it is necessary for both of us to deepen our mutual understanding. It's not too late to make a decision after coming to know each other better, right?"

Her opinion was fair enough.

But when I looked back at what had happened so far, I didn't feel like believing her words blindly.

I peeked into Tsukimori's eyes.

What was she thinking?

She did not avoid my glance in the slightest. In her big, almond-shaped eyes I could clearly see my own reflection.

It was I who gave in at last. I released her from my gaze and mounted my bicycle.

"—Get on."

"Thank you!"

I heard her cheerful voice.

After she had gotten on the carrier, I took off. She was light, just as she had said herself.

"Promise me that you won't do anything that would bring me into focus anymore like today."

"I'll do my best."

"No, not just your best, promise it."

"Nonomiya-kun, the wind feels so pleasant. Riding a bicycle together is even better than I thought."

I spotted our reflection in a street mirror. Tsukimori was holding her skirt down with her right hand, wrapping her left arm around me, and smiling dazzlingly while watching the town's scenery passing us by.

Completely unable to complain any more to a girl who entrusted her body to me, I just answered: "...Lucky you."

I kept on riding the bike while channeling all my unvoiced discontent and displeasure into pushing the pedals.

Be it because of envy or jealousy, I sensed some intensive gazes from other students on their way home. It was clear whose fault it was since I had never experienced anything of this kind when cycling alone.

I was riding a bicycle with *Youko Tsukimori* on the back.

This was one of those sweet moments that are worthy of being called a memory of adolescence. I, in the midst of this period of life, was probably supposed to pride myself on such an event that anyone would envy me for.

To tell the truth, I was proud enough to have a certain sense of superiority, believing that there was no one else who had something as noble as her on his carrier.

Well, this only lasted for the short while during which I forgot about her troublesome personality and the murder recipe.

During the following hours I would definitely turn into her toy, so I needed to be emotionally prepared.

I had accepted Tsukimori's request. The reason was simple: I was interested in her.

Apart from that, call it a property of mine or just a preference: I enjoyed these thrilling conversations with her.

I changed into my waiter uniform in the staff room; I put on narrow black slacks, did up the buttons of my white shirt and the black vest above, slipped into a pair of wing tip leather shoes and lastly I wound a rather long apron around my hips. After checking my appearance in front of the mirror, just to be sure, I headed to the kitchen.

The instant I entered the kitchen, my nose was tickled by the aromatic fragrance of coffee beans—a smell I was fond of.

The reason why I had chosen to work in this British-style café "Victoria" was, as a matter of fact, because the best coffee in the vicinity was served here.

Upon spotting me, my colleagues greeted me.

"Mister Kujirai?" I addressed the broad back of a man who was grinding coffee with a hand mill. The sturdy bespectacled addressee turned around with a warm smile. I continued, "I would be in charge of waiting the tables today, but may I change to the kitchen staff?"

"What's the matter?"

"It's a personal one, I'm afraid, but to tell the truth, a classmate of mine has come today."

"Eh? Why would you want to change your post then?"

"Well, I wouldn't be able to keep my classmate company. And besides, isn't it quite embarrassing to be watched while working?"

As if I would let her watch! I knew that my resistance was childish, but this was my last stand after having failed miserably at turning her down.

There was someone apart from the shop manager who reacted sharply to my words.

"Hey, Nonomiya! Is it a guy or a gal?" asked a woman who was clothed like a pastry cook and was putting some fruit on a parfait right beside me. "If it's a guy I'll switch with you. As long as he's my type, of course!"

The whole staff grimaced as if they had taken bitter medicine when they realized that Mirai-san's *bad habit* had appeared again.

Her full name was Mirai Samejima. Mirai-san was the oldest face among the people

at Victoria, and even the manager took his hat off to her.

According to her, she was still in university, but looking at how she behaved more important than the manager on some days—no, make that "everyday"—she gave me the impression of being older than that.



"Sorry to let you down, Mirai-san: it's a girl!"

"Hmph. Well, the fact that you brought a gal along gets me interested just as much."

With skillful movements Mirai-san quickly finished the parfait and, after throwing a piece of block chocolate into her mouth, tripped to the counter from where she had an overview of all the tables.

"Who is it? Come on, spill it."

She scowled over the counter into the shop while rolling the piece of chocolate in her mouth. The other staff members, too, didn't miss the chance and scanned the café from behind her.

I was hoping someone would remonstrate with them about their snoopy behavior, but even the one who was in the position to do so—the shop manager—was peeking with a face gleaming with curiosity.

Giving up, I admitted: "It's her," and pointed at Tsukimori who had taken a seat at the window and was sitting there like an unworldly, well-educated lady.

A cheer arose among the staff; the positive reaction of the guys was so blatant that I would have felt like an idiot if I had claimed that I had expected it.

"Damn! What a beauty! Way too good for you, Nonomiya, that's for sure!"

Mirai-san was apparently irritated with something and ran her iron fist into the pit of my stomach.

"...does anybody know why I deserve to be punched?"

My trembling question was only met with pitiful glances.

"You always act as if you didn't care two figs about love, but you do your thing in the background, huh, you sneaking lech!"

Apparently, Mirai-san mistook Tsukimori and me for lovers.

"...Mirai-chan and her new boyfriend haven't been getting along lately, you know," the manager whispered into my ear.

"So it's only a matter of time until they split up, I suppose?"

"...Probably," he nodded after backing off again.

Mirai-san could be categorized as pretty if she kept quiet. As a matter of fact, she was often approached by the other sex. However unfortunate, her looks were spoiled by her unyielding personality, which was also the reason why her relationships never lasted long. I knew of none, at least.

"Mhh!? Saruwatari!? Gotten all lovestruck or what?!"

"I-I haven't! I'm not lovestruck or anything!"

"Then you better stay that way!"

Today's sacrifice was Saruwatari-san. Mirai-san's sharp kick landed straight in his buttocks.

At times when she didn't get along with her boyfriend or when she broke up with one, her mood would take a free fall.

And we at Victoria just called that ill-humored Mirai-san "the beast". Unfortunately though, there was no hero in disguise at our café. As soon as the beast went berserk, there was no solution but to weather the storm.

"Mister Kujirai, I'm off waiting the tables."

"O-Okay, good luck."

Discretion is the better part of valor after all.

The kitchen resounded with the cries of the poor man who had become the prey of the beast.

Our café was not too big: there were eight tables and six counter seats. The staff consisted of a total of 5 people, two of which attended the customers while the others worked in the kitchen. But I very much liked that relaxed and comfortable atmosphere.

The mood of this British-style café was supported by appropriate antique tables and

chairs. The various well-chosen decorations were apparently selected by the manager's British wife. Apropos, the name of the café was taken from his wife's first name.

With Victoria being located on the first floor of a multi-tenant building near the station and having an interior that should please the fairer sex, there were comparatively many young women like office ladies or college students.

When I came to take her order, Tsukimori scrutinized me from head to toe.

"Your garçon outfit looks handsome."

"Waiter" would have been the proper way to address the staff here, considering that it was designed in a British style, but "garçon" is apparently more common here in Japan.

Since I judged it to be too much a trifle to correct, I only thanked her casually with a smile, "Thanks," and added, "and a café goes well with you."

Tsukimori smiled back at me and replied "Thank you."

I was quite honest. A beautiful girl in a café always makes for a good picture.

"The staff are quite lively, aren't they?"

She moved her gaze towards the kitchen.

"You could hear the commotion from here? That sure is a problem for a shop in the service industry."

I placed a glass of water and a wet towel on the table.

"But it looks fun."

"I wonder about that; some even start crying once in a while. At any rate, I have confidence in our coffee. And none of our dishes are half bad."

"I see. I would like a cup of that good coffee then. And please add your recommended confectionery to the order."

"Then how about our recommended blend plus the owner's hand-made apple pie?"

Since Tsukimori nodded, I bowed respectfully and said "Certainly."

I forwarded the order to the kitchen staff.

"You sure are an unfriendly guy."

Mirai-san was there making a frown instead of food.

"You think so? Actually I am trying to be more amiable when I attend guests, though."

"When does that happen? To me, there's no difference. Seriously, what does she like about a guy like you?"

Her eyebrow raised, she sceptically mustered Tsukimori.

"I forgot to mention, but she is not my girlfriend."

"She isn't?"

"No. Just a classmate."

"Then tell me what a beauty and mere classmate wants from you."

"It's not me, it's the café. Apparently she is a fan of cafés."

Since there was no merit at all in telling her the truth, I just made something up.

"That's all? Boring."

"As always, you are so self-centered it's almost refreshing. I'm dead sure you would have been irritated even if she was my lover."

"It's refreshing because I'm honest! To begin with, I think there must be something wrong with those that are delighted about other people's happiness. Every one of them is either a hypocrite or just scheming something."

"A lovely opinion loaded with prejudice, I have to say."

I wasn't as dismissive as I may have appeared, though. In fact, in my mind I even had to agree with her—is it because of that warped personality of mine?

I felt inclined to ask her, who was "honest" by her own judgment and "erratic" by

everyone else's, for her opinion regarding a certain question.

"Mirai-san, may I ask you something?"

"Mh? What is it?"

"What do you think about someone who doesn't grieve over their misfortune?"

"Sounds fishy to me," she answered quick as a shot. "Misfortunes are called that because you they make you sad, right? If you don't get sad, then you can't call it a misfortune."

"I see," this time I actually put my agreement into words.

I darted a sidelong glance at Tsukimori.

Tired of waiting or just interested in the café's decoration, she was looking around the shop. Apparently, the white ceramic cat and black glass cat set was to her liking; she stood up and examined it up close.

Who in this café would have guessed that she was in fact a hapless girl who had lost her father only recently?

I reckoned nobody.

One could never observe a stirring of extreme emotions in her. She would always appear calm and mature.

I didn't know whether she purposely controlled her feelings or just simply wasn't the type of person to show them, but she didn't look sad *at all* to me.

Of course, it wasn't unthinkable that she just didn't want to unsettle the people around her and was thus desperately hiding her sadness. Or that might actually be the normal reaction of a girl after such a mishap. After all, the deceased wouldn't return, and mourning forever can't be called very healthy either.

But those are just pieces of theory. Is it really possible to deal with one's feelings in such a short time? Especially if it's sadness?

I recalled Mirai-san's words.

Indeed. It seemed fishy.

The dessert was able to satisfy Tsukimori's tastes.

"It's delicious," she praised while happily finishing up her coffee and apple pie without leaving anything over.

I headed to her table to clear up.

"Has everything been to your liking?" I asked, whereupon Tsukimori darted a discontented glance at me.

"Are you telling me to leave?"

"I see you are quick on the uptake."

"I really like this café."

She flashed a smile as if she would start to hum any moment.

"Aha. Pleased to hear that. But don't forget that there are lots of different cafés in the world. You ought to try them out as well."

"I really like this café," repeated Tsukimori with exactly the same smile and exactly the same words.

"I see sometimes you aren't quick on the uptake," I mostly repeated myself as well.

Suddenly Tsukimori stood up and walked further into the shop, apparently towards the kitchen. When I followed in wonder, she was giving the staff a natural greeting and smiling like a blooming flower.

"Pleased to meet you."

It was obvious at a glance that her rosy greeting got the staff flustered. Apparently all of them were quite excited about her. Well, except for Mirai-san who remained unimpressed.

"I am Youko Tsukimori, a classmate of Nonomiya-kun's," she introduced herself with

polite manners.

"Ah, yes, Nonomiya-kun told us," answered the manager respectfully despite being way older than her.

"I have to say this is such an adorable little café."

"Thank you very much!"

The manager blushed slightly, moved by her radiant smile.

"I am so jealous of everyone—"

The staff looked at her in surprise. A girl, who seemed to have anything one could be jealous of, was jealous of them.

"—Because you have the privilege to work at such a wonderful café."

Youko Tsukimori looked plainly stunning, set aflame in the twilight. Although that was probably due to the backlight from the sunset. In that very moment, everyone was fascinated by her exceptional aura.

"I can't even imagine what bliss it would be to work at such a wonderful place."

Being the person in this room that had the most resistance against her, I smiled wryly at her star-like attitude. I also found that she had gone over the top with that exorbitant exaggeration.

However, the manager's next words erased the smile on my lips.

"...um, Tsukimori-san, you said?"

"Yes."

"Would you like to work here?"

"Mister Kujirai—"

I couldn't keep silent. I wanted to keep him from committing a grave mistake. Faust, you are bargaining with Mephistopheles!

However, someone seized my shoulder and held me back. The smell of chocolate was in the air.

"Just watch," Mirai-san said with a mischievous smile. Here we had another devil.

"Err, actually, there is a vacant post at the moment. And since you are Nonomiya-kun's classmate, we don't have to worry about your background. So, if you'd like, we would gladly welcome you, Tsukimori-san."

The other staff members nodded their heads in agreement, too.

It was just like group hypnosis. They must have been mesmerized by the devil and lost their minds.

"I am really happy about your offer, but... can you really make do with me? To tell you the truth, I have never worked anywhere before," answered Tsukimori hesitatingly after wavering for a short while.

"No no, don't worry! Everyone has to begin somewhere. Besides, I'm positive that you, as someone with outstanding manners, are suited for this kind of business!"

Sure, her acceptance among the customers would be outstanding! They can only see her superficial side after all.

"I'll gladly accept your offer then if you have so much confidence in me," replied Tsukimori with a bright smile.

Everyone welcomed her warmly with a smile as well. I was the only one who made a sour face, while feeling awfully removed from that ring of blessings.

Because I knew better.

I knew that a bold and determined character lurked beneath her surface, which showed only a beautiful girl of excellent character who was thus loved by everyone.

To make things worse, bright Tsukimori was well aware of her own attractiveness. And just now I had learned that she also knew how to use it correctly.

"Why are men just so weak against pretty girls?" whispered Mirai-san into my ear after she had pulled me by the shoulder, the counter between us.

"A good question. After all, the guys in this café are all 'weak' against you as well," I answered casually.

"It feels just wrong when you're giving compliments. But it's no bad feeling. Let me pet your head as a reward."

Mirai-san's palm approached my head, but I refused gloomily. "I'm not in the mood. Please don't confuse me any further."

"No need to be reserved! If you want, I may even give you one piece of my chocolate?"

"Are you okay with it? Aren't you against the employment of Tsukimori?"

"You want me to object, don't you?"

"Well, only your objection would be able to put an end to this welcoming mood."

"Can't be bothered. There's no reason to object."

"Why?"

I was surprised that Mirai-san would allow such a farce.

"Because it's damn funny to see you protest so blatantly when you usually act so cold!!"

Mirai-san cackled.

"...you do realize how awful your personality is?"

"You're worse off than I am, right? If my intuition doesn't fail me, Tsukimori isn't the type of woman a helpless guy like you could handle."

"Doesn't bother me. I don't plan on making a move on her."

"*You* may think so, but what about her?"

Mirai-san narrowed her eyes and peeked searchingly into my face from close up.

"No use punching me, for your information."

"Yeah yeah. Looking forward to the next few days."

Without caring about my strong rebuff, Mirai-san waved her hand and toddled back into the kitchen.

It felt like it was just a matter of time until she would get wind of our odd relationship—a woman's intuition?

I told myself that I had to make sure Tsukimori wouldn't say any unnecessary things to Mirai-san.

"I work here now."

The girl in question, Tsukimori, approached me merrily in spite of all the headaches she was causing me.

"It's still not too late. Won't you think it over again?"

My reply was cold, but my heart was colder.

"Thank you for worrying about me. But since the manager was so kind to offer me this position, I will try my best!"

She cutely clenched her fist, full of confidence.

"I'm not worrying. I am bothered."

"I am looking forward to working with you, colleague."

Tsukimori's smile hadn't cracked even once.

Mirai-san had mentioned that I was not someone who could handle her.

I found myself right in the course of experiencing just how spot-on she was.

The next morning in the classroom.

All of a sudden, Tsukimori came to my desk and said with a smile as warm as

sunbeams shining through the leaves of a tree and a voice as soft as a gentle summer breeze to Usami:

"I have been employed at the café Nonomiya-kun works at."

Time stopped in the noisy classroom. At least, Usami did—like a clock whose battery had run dry.

"...eh? Youko-san? You work together with Nonomiya? Why? Eeh?"

Her bewilderment made her look like one of those automatons that jump out of striking clocks every hour.

It was like a déjà-vu of yesterday.

"The shop manager asked me to help them out because there was a shortage of staff. I am a little anxious because, well, I have never worked anywhere before. But the manager assured me that I will be fine," explained Tsukimori unaffectedly.

"You should talk! ...You're the one who made him say that."

It was me, naturally, who spat out those words in a volume no one could perceive.

"Maybe I should join you..."

"Don't skip your club. You have to do your best and become a regular player." I was able to predict the direction this conversation would take, so I put a stop to it in advance.

"Why don't you stop by this weekend, Chizuru? I may not be able to keep you company since there's still a lot I have to learn, but there's still Nonomiya-kun. Right, Nonomiya-kun?"

I glared at her smiling face for the brink of a second. She tilted her head slightly, asking "Hm?" and retaining her unbreakable smile.

"Yeah, you're always welcome in our café, Usami."

I swore to myself to complain to Tsukimori afterward.

"Okay! I'll drop by! I'll definitely drop by!"

Usami rejoiced grandly, her eyes sparkling. Her straightforward reaction made a good deal of my gloomy mood just flow away.

But there was a serious problem. Judging from the looks of my classmates, it was obvious that they would raid the café this weekend. And this time it seemed quite difficult to stop them.

"Listen up, everyone! Nonomiya is giving us some explanations!!!"

Kamogawa came clapping me on the shoulder with a disgustingly gentle smile. Behind him stood a group of guys with the same disgusting smile on their faces. It was the guys-alliance, and they demanded justice from the one who had stolen the march from them.

It was sickening.

"I am so going to protest to Tsukimori," I swore determinedly.

[Bitter Chocolate]

I had to admit it: Youko Tsukimori was indeed a perfect girl.

It was naturally me who was assigned to mentor her, being in the same class and all. At first I was rather sour about that cumbersome task, but I soon learned that it's quite enjoyable to teach someone who's good at remembering things.

Only two weeks had passed since Tsukimori had started working at Victoria, but she was already able to do any work related to waiting the tables on her own, such as attending to the customers, taking their orders and operating the register.

In terms of handling the customers, she might have even surpassed anyone else in this café. Furthermore, thanks to the customers who would visit only to enjoy her in a waitress uniform, sales were on the rise, too.

The manager and the other employees were quite impressed with her abilities, while it was no surprise to me since I knew her from school.

What was a surprise, however, was that Tsukimori and Mirai-san were on very good terms. I would have been able to understand it if they had been like cat and dog, but in truth you could even say that they turned out to be a good match.

"I was convinced you wouldn't like her type of person," I addressed Mirai-san.

"It's the opposite. Women like Youko can't stand me."

Mirai-san flashed the kind of smile you would expect of the leader of some wicked organization that schemes to conquer the world.

"Why is that?"

"Conjurers don't like audience that sees through their tricks. And you see, the tricks of those women don't work on me." Indeed, Mirai-san's intuition was queerly sharp.

"There's this gal in university who's quite popular with the guys because of such tricks. Well, once I was kinda pissed off by her attitude—okay, my mood had hit the rocks during that period in general—but anyway, I cut her down to size in front of all the others. And when I was finished with her, she wept and wept... such a pain."

"My condolences."

"Right? She always runs away right when she spots me ever since. As if *I* was the bad one!"

Mirai-san seemed pleased about having my assent, but my condolences naturally belonged to the poor young woman who had made Mirai-san her enemy.

"But Youko's nothing like that. She seems to be unfeigned, without any tricks or pretenses."

Mirai-san turned her gaze towards the tables where Tsukimori was serving the customers.

"I was keen to blow her cover, but no matter how fiercely I observe her, she shows no openings. Heh, at first I was excited about the arrival of a powerful opponent and was like, 'Don't think you can deceive me forever!', but—"

Mirai-san made a short pause to sneer.

"—Lately, I've come to think that this is how Youko really is."

I followed her gaze to Tsukimori.

Indeed, she was always dignified, so I couldn't even imagine her whining. Even with this cross-grained personality of mine, I considered that gleam of hers pure and not some trick.

She had even managed to tame the "beast". No wonder that the "humans" around her would be captivated by her.

"What I like most about her is definitely that she isn't scared of me," said Mirai-san, who then turned around to the kitchen and suddenly shouted: "SARUWATARI!"

"Y-Yes, ma'am!"

"Do your work properly!"

"I...I will! I will do it so properly!" cried Saruwatari-san, and moved even faster than before.

"See? Any other guy's like that, right?"

"Are you a devil?"

"You moron! It may not look like it, but Saruwari actually has a crush on me, you know?" Mirai-san tapped my forehead with her index finger. "Though I just don't have a thing for such timid guys."

"You *are* a devil."

I was speechless, only rubbing my forehead.

"Anyway, the point is I like her. Even if it's just some faked mask. It's my loss!"

"Is it as simple as that?"

"It is. However vicious Youko may turn out to be, I won't be able to dislike her so easily anymore. It's the same as my fondness of chocolate, which I can't stop though everyone babbles that eating too much isn't good for my health."

The self-proclaimed chocolate addict Mirai-san sat down on an edge of the counter, took a block chocolate out of her pocket and threw it in the air just to catch it with her healthily red tongue.

"My, that is bad manners Mirai-san! Don't always try to snack on chocolate when the shop manager is not watching. He told me that certain story about you, you know? Once, you collapsed because you wouldn't eat anything but chocolate," scolded Tsukimori, who had come over to forward an order, with the attitude of a class officer towards a delinquent.

"Speak of the devil!" countered Mirai-san in a daunting tone that sounded like nothing but a perfect example of delinquency.

"You were talking about me? Not badly I hope, *right*?"

"Why, of course not. We were praising you, Youko."

"Very well, I will take your word for it this time."

In contrast to what they said, they both seemed to enjoy talking to each other.

"You like me, don't you?" asked Mirai-san out of the blue.

"Yes, I do," replied Tsukimori in a split second with a giggle. "You also like me, right?"

"Without saying." Another immediate reply. They looked almost like old friends. "See? That's what I was getting at."

"I see."

There were still some points that didn't make much sense to me, but I understood roughly what she wanted to say.

"—You really resemble each other in a way, huh," murmured Tsukimori suddenly.

Mirai-san and I looked at each other.

"Such an uncharming guy and I?"

"I'm not *that* frank, you know?"

Our denials were in sync.

"You don't flatter anyone, you don't go with the flow. 'You have your way', so to speak. I am actually quite jealous of that character trait of yours."

I paused for a moment before answering her, "Mirai-san is holier-than-thou to the core, while I simply take to going at my own pace. Unlike her, I am able to adapt and gladly follow superiors if necessary."

"I am always honest and not scheming like you," objected Mirai-san sharply.

"You ought to realize that sometimes the truth can hurt others more than a lie."

"You really are a cheeky fellow without any charm, Nonomiya."

"I don't need that from an indelicate bully like you!"

I sneered, whereupon Mirai-san stood up with glaring eyes.

"All right, Nonomiya!! You just overstepped your bounds! Let's take this outside! I'll bend that warped nature of yours into shape with my fists!"

Tsukimori, who had been watching us, suddenly started to giggle.

"You are like siblings."

"—Nonomiya, my brother?"

She let go of my collar and evaluated me from tip to toe with her gaze.

"Sis," I tried teasing her. To me it sounded like nothing but a Yakuza's way of addressing his female superior.

".....what a nightmare."

Whether it was because Tsukimori had spoiled her appetite for argument or because she was disgusted with the way I had called her, Mirai-san disappeared into the kitchen, holding her head.

"She may not look like it, but Mirai-san likes you, Nonomiya-kun," whispered Tsukimori. "I think she was actually fairly pleased that you called her 'sister'. I am sure she only escaped because she was embarrassed."

I gazed at her.

"What's the matter? Why that wondering face?"

"Even though you have spent much less time with Mirai-san than me, you seem to understand her pretty well."

"I have an eye for people. I knew we would get along well at first glance," Tsukimori told me, seeming very pleased with the compliment I had given her.

"But your eye for men needs some serious polishing."

Apparently, her mood *was* good; all I got in return for my cynical remark was a sugar-sweet smile.

"I really don't think so? You will surely become my dear life partner."

She skillfully put a cup of coffee onto the tray and headed with light steps towards a table.

I didn't intend to go along with her plans, so it was safe to assume that she had no foundation; but upon seeing her self-confident smile, I couldn't help but think that her words would come true.

Still, I had no plans of trusting her off-handedly like Mirai-san.

She wouldn't have stopped doubting Tsukimori so easily either, if she were in my position.

Because I knew about the murder recipe.

After Tsukimori started working at Victoria, Usami also became a frequent sight at the shop.

With her being very communicative, it didn't take long until she was well-liked by both the staff and the manager, and by now she was a proper regular. Thanks to that I was permanently on tenterhooks, afraid that Mister Kujirai might offer her a position.

"Hey, Nonomiya, Nonomiya, listen!"

Since she usually came after her club activities, she mostly arrived just before evening when the number of customers started to drop. She would then happily tell us about "that day's events".

"I was selected as a regular player for the next match!"

"Congratulations. Let me treat you to a drink to mark the occasion."

"Yay!" she shouted out so vigorously she almost jumped to her feet. "Um, in that case... can I ask for one more thing?"

She suddenly got flustered and peeked up at me with embarrassment. Her big, round eyes reminded me of a pygmy marmoset.

"If it's within my power."

"Can I take a photo of you?"

"Why? We see each other almost everyday. There's no point in specially taking a photo, is there?"

"Yes, there is! I want you in your garçon outfit!"

"I see." I pretended to ponder about it. "No."

"Why not! There should be no prob with it! It won't hurt!"

It was so amusing when she became angry and acted like a willful child.

"I'm not very fond of photographs and the like."

That was no lie. I meant it.

"But your garçon look has rarity value; it would be a shame, I tell you! Come on, just one!" she passionately tried to persuade me.

"Well, since you've finally become a regular player and want it so much—"

"Eh? You'll let me?"

Usami's eyes sparkled with expectations.

"—I'll refuse."

Which I gladly belied.

"EEH?! Why?!"

"Because I don't want to have my soul sucked out."

"That's a silly superstition!"

Teasing Usami was a life task of sorts for me. Because watching her reactions was like getting the crisp and shrill sound of a bell, I couldn't stop being mean to her.

"Geez! You miser!"

"Say what you want but my answer remains 'no'."

"I'll just take one secretly then..."

"As you just told the person in question, it's not going to be secretly at all."

"Take that!"

Usami adopted drastic measures: she pointed her mobile phone at me and tried to shoot. I instantaneously turned from her.

"Aaah! W-Why did you turn around?!"

"Taking photographs is prohibited in this establishment. If you do not abide by this rule, I will have to request that you leave," I explained in an official-sounding tone, whereupon Usami puffed up her cheeks and stowed her phone away into her bag, but not without hissing: "Miser!"

A laugh accidentally escaped my lips.

"Cheer up, Usami. I can't consent to the photograph, but I'll treat you to dessert instead."

Her sour look moved me and made me want to spoil her. That's another form of carrot and stick, I guess.

"...an ice chocolate and a mango tart."

"Certainly," I answered her with the best smile I could produce and headed towards the kitchen to forward the order.

I couldn't keep my expression from loosening, which was only reasonable. Usami's straightforward reactions had a sort of stress-alleviating effect on me—probably because I had to deal with peculiar, to say the least, persons during my usual day.

"You're like a child that's playing with its favorite toy." With her chin propped up on her hand, Mirai-san grinned lopsidedly.

"Why, I would never think of her as a toy!" I answered while arranging the bills after I had communicated the order to Saruwatari-san.

Naturally, Mirai-san with her sharp wits had already noticed that I was fond of Usami. I didn't mean to hide it anyway.

"But I would love to have a pet like her at home."

In my mind I pictured a pygmy marmoset trying its best to munch on a mango that was as large as itself.

"No big difference."

"At any rate, it's true that I'm quite fond of her."

"How rare for you to admit something that easily." Mirai-san stared at me, surprised.

"It all depends on who it is about! Her straightforwardness causes me to be honest as well."

"Heh, great! Make her your girlfriend and have her fix that twisted personality of yours!"

Mirai-san laughed out loud, bending forward.

"That twisted personality you mention all the time would surely be twisted even more if *you* were my girlfriend," I thought without actually saying it.

"—That sounds quite realistic to me." Before I knew it, Tsukimori was standing next to me. "As far as I see, Chizuru is interested in you, too, Nonomiya-kun," said Tsukimori with that mature smile she was so good at.

"Oh? So she's not averse, either? I didn't know Nonomiya was such a lady-killer."

Mirai-san gazed curiously at Tsukimori. In my gaze, however, was nothing but suspicion.

What was she scheming?

Unlike Mirai-san, who didn't know that Tsukimori had asked me to go out with her, I completely failed to understand why she would encourage a relationship with Usami.

"Why don't you just go for her?" Mirai-san didn't miss out on that delicious chance.

"It's not my place to decide on that. Or am I just ignorant and love involves only one person?"

"Hey, didn't Youko just say that your chances are good?"

My snappish words made Mirai-san frown.

"You're no better, either, Tsukimori. I don't appreciate that you're trying to spur us on without reason. Careless remarks like these are rude towards both Usami and me."

I realized that I was irritated. Not angered, but irritated. Not like fire, but like "smoldering embers".

"You are right, Nonomiya-kun. I wasn't supposed to say that. I am sorry."

Tsukimori readily admitted her mistake and bowed in apology.

"Er, yeah, sorry. I didn't expect you to be that serious about it," Mirai-san awkwardly scratched her head, following Tsukimori's example.

"...no, it's up to me to apologize. It's just that I'm not used to such talk."

I showed them some kind of self-deprecation, which was the best I could do to varnish over my irritation.

Unable to keep the conversation going, we shared a few seconds of silence.

Then Mirai-san lost interest and disappeared into the kitchen, seeking an outlet for her vexation: "Saruwatari!!"

Tsukimori, however, had turned away from me and was standing still—an indecisive attitude that didn't match the image I had of her.

On my part, I was still uncomfortable, sensing a bitter aftertaste on my tongue even now that the conversation was over.

It wasn't irritation that originated from the earnestness towards Usami that Mirai-san had mentioned.

Sure enough, a part of me disliked it when people rashly meddled in others' love affairs. However, such situations were common and nowhere near rare, and I would have been able to dodge or adapt respectively, hiding my feelings as I used to do so unhesitatingly until now.

Just now, however, I had disgraced myself by exposing my feelings, which was not like me at all. It was probably the first time I had ever had such an experience.

Why was I so irritated? It was a nasty feeling; while I knew that it was there, I didn't know what the cause was.

At that moment, I heard a murmur.

"...I am sorry," whispered Tsukimori with a tiny, sore voice that was easily drowned out by the ado in the shop. I could not see her face as her back was still facing me, but I somehow sensed that her words weren't an "apology" but rather "remorse".

I never would have thought that Tsukimori regretted her words that much. Concurrently to surprise, I also experienced a strong feeling of pacification.

I had found the cause for my irritation. I still did not clearly know why, but it seemed like the cause was Tsukimori.

Why was I irritated by her?

Another question arose.

I chose to do a reset of my feelings and bring Usami her order because I thought I would only waste time if I got lost in a labyrinth of thoughts.

However, there was one discovery I had made: a new kind of emotion towards Tsukimori was about to be born.

I didn't know the name of that emotion yet, though.

[Sweet Nightmare]

At the staff room after closing time.

"I would like you to see me home," requested Tsukimori after changing into her school uniform.

"See you home...?" I repeated warily like a parrot.

"You see, I always feel someone's gaze on me on the way from the café to the train station..."

She gave a shiver.

"Aren't you just being paranoid?" I wanted to say at first, but I reconsidered because it was quite possible in her case. After all, she was no doubt eye-catching. Instead, I suggested, "Then you should consult the police rather than me."

"Weak, Nonomiya! That's weak! Come on, be a man and protect her!"

Mirai-san, who had apparently followed our exchange, thumped a table close to her. The staff nearby turned around, surprised, to see what was going on.

"I don't mean to brag, but I don't have confidence in my strength. Even if she gets attacked by a stalker, the best I can do is get beaten up myself."

"You aren't bragging at all! And if you're a man, you ought to bravely fight all the same, even if you have to put your neck on the line!"

"I'm under the impression that you would make a better bodyguard than me, Mirai-san."

"Moron! I'm a delicate young lady, you know? I also need to be protected."

I shrugged exaggeratedly and took a look at the faces of the rest of the staff. They could only answer my gaze with lopsided smiles because they feared her, but their real thoughts were bound to be the same as mine.

"Very funny, indeed."

"Heh, does your face look like you wanna complain? Nonomiya?"

Mirai-san drew closer with glaring eyes.

"Mirai-san, let it be. If Nonomiya-kun refuses so adamantly, there is nothing that can be done about it. I will try my best to get home alone...", Tsukimori sighed and plodded towards the entrance.

The very moment before she closed the door—

".....haah..."

—She let out a deep sigh that resounded through the whole staffroom.

All gazes focused on me at once, each of which was reproachful. A close friend can become a close enemy, indeed.

"See her off, Nonomiya-kun," said the manager at last, siding with Tsukimori like the others.

Powered by this, the whole staff started criticizing me. I was attacked from all sides. Outnumbered. I was completely made out to be the bad guy.

"Fine, fine, I've got it already! I'll go see her home, okay?" I groaned and jumped out of the uncomfortable staffroom to run after Tsukimori.

To my surprise, I caught up with her immediately after leaving the café.

Tsukimori was leaning against a telephone pole in front of the shop, waiting below a street light like the queen of the night.

"I knew you would come."

She spotted me and smiled like a blooming flower—revealing to me that my action wasn't unexpected at all.

I looked up at the night sky in order to suppress my boiling emotions. A crescent moon grinned at me tonight.

"You're not fair."

"What do you mean?"

"What are you scheming?"

"That's not nice, you know? As a girl I am very frightened to walk alone at night, you know?"

"Then why didn't you have your mother pick you up, or ask someone else among the staff see you off, or contact the police?"

"As always, you seem to have no idea of how a girl's heart works. I wanted *you* to see me home."

She laughed as though she was humming and linked her arm in mine. "*Shampoo?*" I wondered silently as I could perceive a sweet fragrance of flowers from her.

"Let's go."

From my experiences so far I had learned that one couldn't get free so easily once Tsukimori had taken the lead, but it was also fact that I, only *unwillingly* accepting her lead, certainly had no submissive nature.

Therefore, the few meters during which my arm was pressed against her full bosom were the purest humiliation to me.

I was beyond hope, though, because for just a second I had thought that, while Youko Tsukimori herself may have been the most ill-natured woman on earth, her soft bosom was blameless.

"I won't run away, so please stop this," I begged her with a sigh mixed in, and finally shook her off.

"Too bad. And we had finally created such a nice mood."

Tsukimori was sullen, but her steps remained light.

While watching her black hair dance behind her, I let out a loud sigh.

It may go without saying, but *my* steps were heavy.

We got on a train heading out of the city and passed through four stations while getting a good shake. When we alighted at our destination, we were in a residential zone in the outskirts.

"I live over there. A few minutes' walk from here."

Tsukimori pointed at a hill. I saw immediately that we would have a hard time climbing, looking at all the slopes and stairs that could be seen there. The sight alone had me dispirited.

"Don't frown like that. Going out with me means coming up this way all the time, you know?"

"My sympathies to your boyfriend."

"Don't worry. You'll get used to it in no time."

Tsukimori walked off without caring about my sagging spirits. "Look, the stars are beautiful tonight," she said, sounding easy-going.

Since I didn't want to turn around after coming so far, I followed her reluctantly.

It was a tranquil residential area and rather "classy".

The streets were lit with comparatively short gaps, but it was still eerily dark around us. I had to admit that the shivering she had shown earlier might have been more than mere acting.

As expected, I was completely drained by the time we came to a stop. Tsukimori, accustomed as she was, showed no indication of strain, making her appear more irritating than ever to me.

"Here we are," proclaimed Tsukimori and stood before the entrance.

It was a large white building. The term "mansion" might be appropriate.

Since her father had been the head of a construction design company, it was a rather fancy design, constructed with tetrahedrons systematically put together, giving it an overall geometric feel. I would have nodded in comprehension if someone had told me it was the house of a physicist.

There was no light inside, so her mother was apparently absent.

While I was curiously looking up at the house, Tsukimori tugged at my sleeve.

"Now that you're here, why don't you come in?"

Her proposal was most suspicious and virtually crying out to be doubted.

I knew it would be a pain if anyone got wind of this visit. If, on top of that, the guys at school learned that no one else had been in the house at the time, the rumors that might emerge from it exceeded my imagination. Especially in Kamogawa's case... I didn't even want to think about it.

By now I was sure everything had been an act of hers to make me enter her house. It would certainly rub me the wrong way if her plan succeeded.

"Good idea. I'm pretty thirsty; can I come in for a drink?"

Nonetheless, I accepted her offer because it was a very rare opportunity.

Though I had, as a matter of fact, *suspended* doubting her due to a lack of progress, I had by no means *stopped*. The suspicion due to the murder recipe was still smoldering in my mind.

Originally I had expected that new progress would come from associating with her and learning more about her, but all my attempts had remained fruitless. The more I was in touch with her, the less I understood her true nature. I had no clue how to distinguish between her jokes and her serious statements. In other words, she was as slippery as an eel.

Hence, I had come to the conclusion that it might be better to approach her mother. From what I had seen of her at the funeral, she was not as complicated a person as Tsukimori. It shouldn't be necessary to probe Tsukimori herself to find out about her relationship with her father.

I followed Tsukimori into the house. Not a sound was to be heard inside.

While taking off my shoes at the entrance, I asked: "What time is your mother coming back?"

"Do you have a soft spot for older women?" teased Tsukimori with a laugh.

"At least more than for you," I answered—with an earnest face as a test.

"Now that's a shock, even if it is meant as a joke."

Tsukimori shook her head while taking out some slippers for us.

It seemed that I had taken the lead.

"My mother has gone out and will be back late. Today is your chance!"

"...just what sort of chance would that be, I wonder?"

I pushed her head away, since she had come closer to peek at my face.

And the lead went back to Tsukimori.

"I only wanted to introduce myself to her since I'm here."

"Oh, that pleases me to hear. Did you finally warm up to me?"

"I don't know how you took my words, but let me assure you that you're wrong."

I followed her into the living room.

"I'll bring something to drink. Make yourself comfortable on the sofa."

Tsukimori disappeared into the neighboring room, turning on the light there. Half of a well-equipped system kitchen entered my view.

I let my gaze sweep through the living room.

Like the outside, the residence of the Tsukimoris looked quite respectable from the inside: there was a leather sofa with an amber luster and a queerly shaped glass table which even an amateur could identify as a designer table. Furthermore, I found a terrifyingly large LCD TV and luxurious hi-fi equipment. The rumors were true: they were quite a wealthy family.

To my disappointment however, there was nothing special apart from that, like an object that would have served me as a clue for Tsukimori's relationship with her father.

Well, it was only natural that nothing too peculiar was placed in the living room where a lot of people went in and out. Unfortunately, though, I didn't have any pretext that would have allowed me to look through the other rooms, either. I couldn't help feeling that I had forfeited the rare chance of getting into her house.

I was still reeling in disappointment when Tsukimori came back with a tray of drinks.

"I hope you are fine with black tea?"

"Perfectly."

I intended to leave after emptying my cup. There was no use in staying for too long. However, Tsukimori had apparently read my intentions: "Make yourself at home! It's only Saturday tomorrow, so there's no need to hurry, right?"

"Are you out of your mind? I'm a man, you know?"

As if to make her the outlet of my letdown, my wording became a little harsh. I realized that I was acting pretty selfishly, since she wasn't to blame that I had set my own expectations too high.

"That only supports my argument! A boy should never leave an anxious girl behind alone."

"But this is your own home."

"Do you believe stalkers care about such obstacles?"

"How should I know how a stalker thinks? In the first place, that story sounds quite fishy to me anyway."

"Too bad," Tsukimori sighed slightly. "You sure don't let me have my way, Nonomiya-kun."

"That's my line. You lead me by the nose all the time!" I objected promptly. I was naturally unable to just accept it that my opponent forestalled me in saying what had constantly been on my mind.

A moment later, she whispered in a voice that was too loud to be a monologue: "...I wonder if I should consult Mirai-san about Nonomiya-kun..."

I almost spat out my black tea.

"...is that a threat?"

I stared with hostile eyes at Tsukimori.

"It's unavoidable. I simply wish to receive a piece of good advice from an older woman like Mirai-san. There's nothing strange about it, is there?"

Tsukimori covered half of her face under a cushion as if to block my gaze.

"Consulting Mirai-san about love problems is like asking the devil the way to heaven."

"That was a good one."

Tsukimori buried her nose in the cushion and giggled.

"It's no laughing matter. It's a most serious matter of life and death!"

I almost got a headache just by imagining a merry Mirai-san teasing me. I would surely have to say farewell to my busy yet peaceful work life, because she would be asking me about Tsukimori non-stop.

"I would not mind our colleagues at the café knowing about us. I don't like having secrets."

"*You* don't mind."

Tsukimori may have been used to being the center of attention, but I was not. Just the thought of capturing everyone's attention gave me the shivers.

A comfortable role as a spectator suited me best. Everyone has their own qualities.

"To be frank, I would love to openly attempt winning you over."

"After all, you seem to be good at getting all the others on your side, right?" I said with a full load of sarcasm.

"An inborn virtue of mine?" countered Tsukimori without trouble.

"You don't say. You are a schemer, an actor and, if we get to the heart of it, just plain wicked. It's just that everyone is being deceived by your beautiful looks and don't notice your deadly thorns."

"You think I am beautiful? I am on cloud nine!"

"Where have the 'deadly thorns' gone?"

"Paying regard to things that aren't true goes against my principles."

Judging from her serious mien, she did not in the least mean to be joking. Most likely she was even scandalized, in fact.

But strangely enough, I also realized that a girl as "eye-catching" as her might actually need such nerves of steel.

"Would you like another cup?" smiled Tsukimori, ladylike and slightly inclining her head, with a porcelain tea pot in her hand.

"Please."

I held out my tea cup to her, waving the white flag in my mind.

I had chosen to watch her devilish scheme for a little longer.

Thirty minutes later.

"Your mother is pretty late," I addressed Tsukimori, who was sitting opposite me.

"Yes, she said she would be."

"When is she going to be back then?"

"Hm... sometime around ten, I suppose?"

"That makes thirty minutes from now, huh."

I was starting to feel uncomfortable sharing the same time and room, just the two of us,

but I was willing to bear with another half an hour and lay back in the sofa.

Tsukimori murmured, "Well, twenty-four hours from now, to be exact."

I bolted upright on the sofa and stared at her. She was leisurely browsing through a fashion magazine.

"What does that mean?"

"She has gone on a company outing and will be back tomorrow."

"—You deceived me?"

I was surprised myself by how deep my tone was.

"I honestly told you she would be late."

"How's that honest!? I'm leaving," I declared, standing up and heading towards the entrance. Most of the irritation was at myself for readily taking her bait.

Suddenly, something soft enveloped my arm. Tsukimori had clasped it.

"...please, don't leave me alone. I'm frightened!"

Her begging attitude and the soft touch against my arm made me falter.

The unusual fragility she was showing me was more than enough to activate my protective instincts—even if it was a deliberate action of hers to seduce me.

But my rationality cooled down the overwhelming reality and kept me from making the wrong decision.

"Your charm doesn't work on me! Besides, that's not fair. I have not accepted going out with you."

Two teenagers alone under one roof — an alluring setting. Being a boy in his teens, I was naturally interested in what would happen in such a situation, all the more if the girl in question was Youko Tsukimori.

"I don't mind if it's you."

As expected, she tried to capture me with inviting eyes and sweet words.

Had I met Youko Tsukimori under any other circumstances, I would have stood no chance against her seduction.

"I feel honored, but I have no such intentions!"

However, unlike the Nonomiya in that hypothetical world, the real one bore up against her. Because, much more than I was hoping for an alluring development, I was scared.

It was wariness that sustained my rationality.

What was Youko Tsukimori scheming?

It was then that I felt that I had caught a glimpse of the true intention behind her request to date her.

Perhaps, Tsukimori didn't have in mind to get rid of me, but to get me under her control?

She was well aware of her own attractiveness and knew how to use it effectively. I had been able to observe that fact more than enough lately. So, perhaps she was trying to make me her faithful puppet of sorts? She could be sure that I would not leak her secret in that case, couldn't she?

Of course, provided that she really had noticed that I knew of and had the murder recipe.

Either way, I had to get out of there as fast as possible. Even if my assumptions were true and confirmed by Tsukimori at that, it was only a matter of time until I would give in to her.

Because her words may have been lies, *but her attractiveness was a fact.*

As things stood, I was going to fall victim to her venom. I knew for sure that as soon as that happened, the poison would spread slowly but surely and paralyze my will to resist.

I shook her off and hurried towards the entrance, but Tsukimori rushed after me in the

same breath. This time she clung to me from behind, restraining me.

Her warmth, her softness, her entrancing fragrance blended into a charm deluding the senses and attacking me from behind.

"...It does not matter what you feel for me..."

Her soft breath touched the nape of my neck. I knew that I had to escape, but I couldn't move a muscle.

"...touch me... do whatever you want with me..."

Her delightful words entered my head through my eardrums and turned into paralyzing electrical signals flashing through my entire body. My poisoned legs had already lost the strength to resist a single high school girl.



She gently pushed me into the sofa, leaning against me. The lamp behind Tsukimori created a mystic contrast on her face. She placed her head on my shoulder and put her hands lightly on my chest—as if to feel my heartbeat. Her white, slender neck was exposed to me right by my chin.

While I was still bereft of speech, she whispered into my ear, "Please. I want you to."

It sounded to me like a saint's enigmatic absolution.

A moment later, she nibbled the defenseless nape of my neck.

The soft sensation of her tender red lips caused my shoulders to jump. I had never experienced such an impulse before, it was similar to tickling but still different.

My body was about to run out of control. In an attempt to push her away, I slid my hands between us and thrust towards the ceiling. Unwilling to be separated, she resisted and twisted her body. My resisting hands merely brushed against her soft breasts, stroked her smooth sides and lost themselves in blank space.

At that moment, Tsukimori uttered a suppressed moan and writhed, still straddling me.

It was smashing. My rationality was entirely blown away by her unexpectedly sensitive reaction.

Letting my instincts take over, I swapped places and sat astride her. I laid one hand on the white nape of her neck and traced her lush red lips with my fingers. I inhaled her intensive flowery scent, kissed her collarbone and put my knee between her thighs.

She reacted exquisitely to each of my actions. I was aware that the blood circulating in my veins was enraptured by pleasure.

Right now———Youko Tsukimori was under my control.

That feeling of elation was far beyond normal. Even I, the cool thinker by principle, would have loved screaming as my feelings told me.

While frantically suppressing the urge to rush, I kept on caressing Tsukimori. I wanted

the pleasure to hold on for as long as possible.

However, I was suddenly stricken by a shock that made my heart skip a beat. I had noticed her unusual reaction.

"—You're trembling."

Tsukimori blinked a few times with her eyes that in passion had lost focus.

"...I am?" she asked with gentle lip-movements, her voice full of heat.

She was unaware of it herself, but she was trembling all over.

Feelings of guilt that I had pushed aside as my rationality had gone out of the window suddenly sprung up in me like water.

"...we really shouldn't be doing this. Let's stop," I stated while raising my body.

Tsukimori's "tremor" appeared to me like "rejection".

I certainly didn't stop because I was a good person but, on the other hand, neither did I enjoy subjugating girls against their will for my own satisfaction.

I was frightened, plain and simple. Frightened of shouldering a sin against *her* that could not be amended.

She was still lying on the sofa, looking up at me with wondering eyes. Behind her rumpled uniform, I could see her bulging snow-white skin. I averted my gaze automatically.

"Why? Didn't I say it's fine?"

"But you are trembling."

"That's because of excitement!"

"I don't think so."

"It is!"

The next moment, Tsukimori said something I couldn't believe.

"It's my first time after all!"

"So I can't help it," she added.

No words.

I cast her off and stood up as if to retreat.

"Why?!" I shouted, channeling all my bewilderment into one word. That was the only thing I could do.

"Everyone has a first time," replied Tsukimori with girlishly pure eyes.

"But that's not how you go about it!"

"That's different for everyone."

"...do as you please as long as it's your own problem. But this time it's me that would have been your partner, you get that?"

"Yes, you are right, I don't know if I will be able to satisfy you because it's my first time....," she worried.

She had to be joking.

"Ah, but I'm positive that I will develop excellent skills the more we do it. You know that I'm a fast learner, right? Be it at school or at work."

However, Tsukimori looked dead serious.

"That's not the problem!!"

When was the last time I had become this agitated? I couldn't remember. Thank you very much for this valuable experience, Tsukimori.

"Why are you always so... so reckless!"

"I am surprised myself."

"Don't act so unconcerned!"

"Someone once said that girls in love are invincible; there might be more truth to it than I thought. After all I do feel capable of anything right now," she nodded approvingly.

"Please, don't only think about yourself..." I let out a grand sigh. "In the first place, what happened to the rumors about you? Haven't you gone out with numerous boys so far?"

It's not like I believed her offhandedly.

A girl like Tsukimori should have had countless opportunities to lose "it" in her life. Wasn't she just playing with me?

"...I don't want to tell you," she averted her gaze to the side.

"You can't say that after dragging me in like that, can you? I have the right to know."

"I don't care."

"Don't be such a child."

"I bet you see me as some kind of slut!"

Tsukimori pursed her lips.

She was now sounding queerly like a precocious little girl. Where did the bewitching girl that seduced me go?

"Fine! I won't ask anymore if you don't want to tell me."

I thought there was no use questioning her in that thickheaded state.

"...Do you really want me to tell you?"

"...Which is it now!"

Good heavens. As always she was hard to read.

Tsukimori took a deep breath and made up her mind.

"I'll be honest. I have gone out with several boys before."

"As I thought."

"Hey, that's not nice, you know. Let me assure you: I may have gone out with various boys, but not once have I given myself to anyone. I didn't even let them touch me like you have. Honestly."

"You want me to buy that?"

"They were all good and kind people and really loved me."

"...Good for you..."

"But every time something felt off. In some way I knew that none of them were my destined partner," she told me with slightly downcast eyes, wallowing in reminiscences.

"Then why me?"

"Because you seemed different from the others! In the beginning it was just a baseless intuition, of course. At first I wanted to go out with you without thinking too deeply, as I used to do with the other boys. Because getting someone to date me is simple."

"That sure doesn't sound like something someone my age would say. Come on, how old are you really?"

Tsukimori found my apathetic attitude funny, it seemed. She giggled with great amusement.

"But I had not dreamed that you would reject me."

"So sorry for not living up to your expectations."

"No, by no means! Thanks to that, I gained a sudden burst of enthusiasm. So the result is absolutely fine!"

"...That's how life goes, I guess. Never the way you want it to."

Tsukimori's triumphant joy had the opposite effect on my mood. She made me remember that whatever I did to her always ended up backfiring on me.

"Indeed... I wonder why things never work out the way you want them in life."

This time it was me who couldn't help laughing, seeing her say that with a solemn mien.

"If *you* of all people don't get your way, us commoners are stumped."

The worries of someone who had everything seemed incredibly ridiculous to me.

"You are all just overestimating me, really."

"But you deserve to be overestimated, from a neutral point of view."

"Why is it that I cannot make you mine, then?"

She squinted at my eyes as if to peek into my heart.

"...Who knows? It's a riddle even to me," I answered vaguely, looking away. For obvious reasons I could have never told her that it's because the murder recipe was on my mind.

"Meany."

"Call me whatever you like."

"But I like you anyway, Nonomiya-kun, even if you are cruel and mean to me," laughed Tsukimori while brushing her hair. It was a gorgeous demeanor. "How can I explain it...? It is just so enjoyable to talk with you."

She carefully chose her words, which made me realize that she was trying her utmost to convey her feelings precisely.

"You could say that we are... trying to outdo each other? Our conversations feel so exciting and enjoyable to me because they're unpredictable. I just can't talk enough with you."

Her words silenced me, and caused me to stare at her. I was struck by surprise that she was of the same mind as me.

Strong sympathy can change ridiculously easily into a sense of closeness.

Indeed, at that very instant, Youko Tsukimori became a special girl to me.

"When I imagined how stimulating every day would become if I went out with you, I realized that you had to be my destined partner. So I did not really need to hesitate. You are the one I deemed destined for me; I wanted you to have my first time."

To make matters worse, she looked even more attractive now that I had become conscious of her. I've heard subjectivity incorporates a function that applies a filter to the brain that makes you interpret things in your favor.

"I didn't know I was so bold."

"And I wish I didn't know that you were so sharp tongued."

I shrugged extensively for show. Of course, I was not at all composed. It was quite the contrary: I was disturbed. You could say that I had a hard time dealing with the radical change in my feelings.

I had previously regarded any situation objectively with the utmost effort in order to bear up against Tsukimori and her staggering presence. Otherwise I would have fallen victim to her charm like everyone else.

However, now that subjectivity had mixed into my view, I couldn't remain calm anymore. My awakened instincts told me to savor the defenseless fruit before my eyes.

"I'm leaving."

This time I seriously had to leave or I would end up loathing myself.

"Don't you want to check?"

I heard Tsukimori's voice behind me when I was walking towards the living room door.

"Check what?"

"—Whether it really would have been my first time or not."

I felt the urge to turn around, but I chose to remain on course.

She would have surely shown me a devilish smile that very much met my preference and ruined my newly gained determination.

"Please forget what happened today. I wasn't myself."

"I don't want to," she declared.

"It's in both our interests."

"It's a valuable memory of the 'destined partner' I finally found."

"I'm stunned that you can use that phrase so carelessly. Say that again in ten years."

"I am not using the word carelessly. Didn't you know that every girl is searching for her 'destined partner' from the moment she is born?"

"Well, my sympathies for all the trouble."

With that parting shot I opened the door. In that instant, I heard footsteps rushing towards me resounding on the flooring.

"Are you really leaving me?"

...No use using such lonely words.

"Of course."

"Even though I want you to stay so much?"

...No use using such pleading words.

"Well, *I* want to go home as fast as possible."

"You really are hard to deal with, Nonomiya-kun," she said, sighing.

I spontaneously turned around and glared at her. "You're the last person I want to hear that from!"

Tsukimori laughed heartily at seeing my unwilling attitude.

...Please, let me go already.

"Goodbye."

"Be seeing you."

Even though I intentionally stomped on the floor to express my bad temper, I happened to see her sad and weak wave goodbye. It would be a lie to say that I didn't feel anything while closing the front door.

[Orange & Wine]

Our classroom at the beginning of the week. Tsukimori greeted me with a warm smile upon seeing me, "Good morning."

After wavering for a few seconds, I quickly replied, "Good morning," and hurried to my desk.

I didn't want to look like a coward, but neither did I feel like arguing with her early on a Monday morning. If possible I wanted to put some distance between us and not see her face for a while. Because looking at her face would remind me of that Friday night that had become a dark memory I wanted to bury as fast as possible.

However, Tsukimori is a girl who is unaware of your feelings at such times.

"Nonomiya-kun, your collar is awry," she pointed out cheerfully and stood naturally before me as if this had been her place for a hundred years. Then she fixed my collar with her white slender fingers.

Below my eyes was her white neck. I closed them firmly for a moment as if to shake off my stray thoughts.

My collar wasn't awry at all.

"When are you visiting me next?" whispered Tsukimori, moving her lustrous lips.

She just wanted to bring Saturday's business up again.

"As bright as you are you should be able to tell if anyone would ever come to your place again after experiencing such a night."

While I was helpless,

"I am free next week on Saturday evening. My mother should be late on that day, too, because of a meeting of the association,"

She couldn't have been more nonchalant.

"Do you even think I'd say 'Yes'?"

"Do you even think I'd want to hear 'No'?"

"It looks like I have to be clear to you since you seem to become dull when things don't go the way you want."

I approached until we were nose to nose, and declared point-blank:

"You won't see me there a second time!"

To top off my remark, I flashed a Tsukimori-like smile.

"You needn't be embarrassed."

However, the originator's smile was uninterrupted.

"From time to time you really behave idiotically, you know?"

"Whereas you are always mealy-mouthed, right?"

Others looking on must have seen best friends, smiling at each other from that close distance.

"Aren't Youko-san and Nonomiya kinda like... newly-weds...?"

And so some voiced unhappy, ill-informed comments with discontented expressions. Chizuru Usami had made the newly-wed remark.

I didn't know what a baby blow fish looked like, but I figured it must be somewhat like Usami just then, scowling at me with her chin on her desk and blowing up her cheeks like a balloon.

Usami really was a peculiar girl. I reckoned there weren't many people that were that adorable when in an ill temper.

While I was happily observing Usami with a sidelong glance, Tsukimori said embarrassedly, "Did you hear that? Like newly-weds!"

"A bad joke indeed."

If by any chance Tsukimori had blushed with at least one cheek, so to speak, I *might*

have reconsidered and I *might* have admitted her cute sides. Unfortunately though, Youko Tsukimori couldn't be understood that easily.



The next moment, her eyes changed to moon crescents. The devil hath ascended to earth. In my eyes I could see a black pointed tail growing from her.

"Welcome home, darling. Would you like to take a bath? Or would you rather like... me?"

Then she giggled amusedly.

To the others that didn't know her real nature, she must have looked like the purest girl who had successfully played a little prank.

"...a bad joke *indeed*."

But to me it was a nightmare in many senses. One of them being that there was that one guy that couldn't keep quiet when the topic revolved around Youko Tsukimori.

"Hey! Nonomiya!"

There he stood, Kamogawa, with a grimace resembling the doorkeeper of hell.

"Of course it's the bath, right? You naturally go for the bath, right?"

Much to my chagrin, he was followed by a regiment of guys who were eager to support him, "Say it!"

"If you do not choose the bath... you know what happens then, right?"

The group exchanged glances and then simultaneously cracked a friendly smile. They were disgusting.

"Well, as a man it's clear what I take—"

It was up to me to choose, so what? Kamogawa and the others had no say about it.

"—as a man one must take the meal, right?"

But I didn't like trouble.

"A wise choice, Nonomiya-kun!"

"I'm so happy you understand what I mean, Kamogawa-kun."

"Then let's go over there and hear what you have to tell us, shall we?"

"...There are no words to express my current feelings appropriately."

This marked the start of a lot of wasted time, during which I was going to be questioned whether I dated Tsukimori and during which I would have to assure them over and over that that was not the case.

Good grief, they hadn't a clue. They could only act that frivolously because they didn't know about the murder recipe.

And without an inkling of my troubles, Tsukimori waved her hand cheerfully.

"Goodbye, darling!"

Therefore I gave her an appropriate answer.

"I'll be late tonight, honey."

Annoyance drove me to it.

I am sure that a blanket of grief must have enveloped me as I was led away like a low-grade employee who must obey his boss.

—At the time, I had already noticed that an usually noisy classmate of mine, Usami, had been silent the whole time.

But I had no time to worry about her because I had my hands full dealing with Youko Tsukimori, Kamogawa and the rest.

Well, it's hard to say if dealing with her then would have changed what happened after school.

Classes had ended and I was getting ready to leave when I was suddenly stopped by a timid Usami, "...Nonomiya?"

"What's the matter?"

"Err, I noticed that... you and Youko-san have been getting on quite well lately..."

"Not more than what's normal."

Annoyed at hearing that question again, a firm tone entered into my voice.

Usami registered that my mood wasn't favorable and thus got even more faint-hearted.

"...but you're always together."

As I was fed up of talking about Tsukimori, I quickly declared, "We simply see each other often at work and as class officers. That's all." Then I fetched my bag and hurried out of the classroom.

But in the next moment Usami had gone around me and was blocking my way.

"Stooopp!"

"Come on, what is it?"

"Err, say, do you have a few minutes?"

"No."

"I-It's really just a few moments, honestly!"

My stare seemed to be intimidating; she averted her eyes and looked about in the room like a frightened pygmy marmoset.

I took a deep breath—inconspicuously enough to remain unnoticed.

"Depends on what you want."

When I contemplated that I had acted a little too immature and implied that I was willing to compromise, she was visibly relieved.

Usami wasn't at fault. I had just gotten tired of Tsukimori leading me around by the nose and of being picked at by Kamogawa and his followers. In short, I had taken it out on her though she wasn't to blame.

After peeking around at our surroundings, Usami whispered to me, "I'm uncomfortable here... can we go someplace else?"

As I was ready to accompany her for whatever she wanted from me — not least because I wanted to make amends — I nodded wordlessly.

"Shall we go then...?"

Her tense face and awkward gait had me a little worried about what was to come. Still I relaxed because it was only Usami, after all.

I was led to the back of the gym, which was unusually quiet that day.

"Club activities have been suspended starting today, because of the upcoming midterm exams."

"I see." Two questions of mine, namely why the gym was so silent and why Usami wasn't busy with her club, were answered at the same time. "So? What do you want from me?"

I sat down on the concrete edge of the gym, perking up my ears.

The standard line when calling someone out to such a place would surely be "You piss me off!", followed by a quarrel, and I would have found it amusing if that actually was her issue, but as I was likely to lose to her in a serious fight, with her being very athletic, I prayed that it was something else. Something peaceful.

"...It's just a continuation of our earlier talk," said Usami while peeking at me from time to time, "Say, Nonomiya, are you, and Youko-san, um... you know, a couple?"

I wasn't startled. Kamogawa and the others had asked me the same a few moments before. Though *they* had added "If you are, consider yourself as dead as a doornail" with rather serious bloodshot eyes.

"Don't be silly. Of course not!" I laughed, but Usami was still in earnest.

"B-But! You're the only boy she gets on with especially well!"

"As I mentioned earlier, that's merely because we often have to work together."

"But still! Lately, Youko-san has been mentioning you all the time when we talk!"

"Same as above."

"But then! But then, why does Youko-san gaze at you from time to time during classes?"

"...You're barking up the wrong tree. Go ask her!"

That was new to me.

"Say what you want, but I think you two are suspicious! I know it!"

"So?"

"...eh? So what?"

Usami looked dumbfounded.

"What do you want to hear from me?"

Seeing the question marks above her head, I pressed for her answer.

"Will it make you happy if I say that we're dating?"

"No! You mustn't!" she shouted, just to make an 'Oh what have I said!'-like expression the following moment. "...Ah, n-naturally this is not something I have a say in, it's a problem between you and her after all, but, umm, I mean, isn't Youko-san, like, everyone's idol and all? So, you see,..."

Her choppy justification seemed to have no end if nobody interrupted her.

"Usami."

I tapped on the concrete next to me and signaled for her to take a seat. She obediently sat down while embarrassedly toying with her hair.

"Honestly, there is nothing between Tsukimori and me," I assured her firmly, looking into her eyes.

"I see... so there's nothing, huh."

Usami's face began to shine like a child who has been given candy. She was so easy to understand.

That was probably also the reason why I had easily noticed that she was attracted to me, even without Mirai-san's superior intuition.

"Very well then, it seems that I have gained your understanding."

When I was about to stand up, thinking that this was all, she seized my belt.

"Can I ask just one other thing?"

Originally, I planned on just ignoring her grip and standing up, after which I would take a look at her reaction, but since my hips didn't move a bit, I gave up and sat down again.

"...Please go ahead."

"Yeah, um, Nonomiya... you aren't going out with anyone at the moment, right?"

"Right."

Usami cast her eyes down.

"Then—i-is there someone you like?" she asked towards the ground. Her face was tense and her lips pursed like a duck's bill.

Her question wasn't a remarkably rare one. At least to me it wasn't something to get that flustered about anyway. Usually.

However, because of a name that flashed through my mind for a split second, I forgot to answer her.

"...W-Why aren't you saying anything?"

Her anxiety helped me find my tongue.

"...that's already the third question!"

"Uwa! You distracted me! That means there is one! There is someone you like!"

Usami widened her round eyes and leaned backward, completely shocked. I was tempted to give her a push.

"Eh? Who? Who?! Ah! It's Youko-san, isn't it? It's Youko-san!"

"Now we're back where we started. What were those minutes just now? Give me back my time and labor!"

"But who else should it be!"

"Can you tell me what exactly makes you so sure, then?"

"My womanly intuition!"

Her prompt reply made me wonder what nonsense the pygmy marmoset was babbling, but since she really was a woman, I was powerless in front of the weapon called "womanly intuition", which remains a mystery to men.

On top of that, the name that had come to mind actually *was* Youko Tsukimori, so I couldn't bring myself to deny it.

"I think Youko-san sees you in a different light. I know she does, because we've known each other for a long time." The nervousness from before was disappearing. "Even if *you* deny it, I think she is different toward you."

Usami spoke staring straight at me with a resolute gaze.

"...and I understand you just as well, Nonomiya... You're always in my eyes, after all."

It was the gaze of someone who had made up her mind.

"I think you just aren't aware of it, but you consider her special too... I can't put it into words well, but I think you are kind of special to each other. Like, actually it would have been mutual for a while, you just haven't noticed, so what's needed is just a little push... and you know, I was like 'I have to hurry up now!', but then I thought that it would be sort of selfish of me. But then, instead of playing a good girl and having regrets, I thought that it suited me more to be a bad girl for once...go my own way and be straightforward, you know... so, umm..."

Usami hurriedly added, "J-Just a moment," took a few deep breaths and jumped to her feet.

"I, Chizuru Usami, love... you."

The way she confessed couldn't have suited Usami better.

I suppose there aren't any humans on this planet who would not like to receive such a confession from her. I became even fonder of her than before.

"Thank you," I said more or less automatically.

"Eh? Um, you're welcome...?" replied Usami, visibly confused.

I was genuinely happy about her confession since I liked her—a girl that couldn't be more different from me.



A soft breeze blew gently past us as though the school building had smoothed down its edges upon passing by. The back of the gym was so calm that the usual noise felt like a mere illusion.

Suddenly, Usami stretched herself hugely like a cat and—

"NYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

—released a yell towards the blue sky that sounded like a cat's death cry.

"Aah! I feel SO liberated now! So glad I told you!"

Her face was literally shining.

"...Sorry for disturbing you while you're savoring your attainment, but what should I do now?"

"Mh?"

"I haven't given you a reply yet, have I?"

I thought that I was supposed to return her straightforward ball, in whatever form—even if the ball went in a direction she didn't wish for.

The next moment Usami let out laughter like a baby frog.

I actually meant to be as considerate as my limits allowed, but it seems doing something you aren't used to always yields bad results.

"...No need to strain yourself. I'm not expecting a reply anyway. I mean, we're talking about you, Nonomiya?"

She was whispering. Since she was looking at the ground, I couldn't recognize her expression.

"I don't know what's that supposed to mean, but for now I'll just be shocked."

"...you've caught my eye ever since we entered this school, and I've long known that you're not that simple. I'm not expecting a favorable answer!"

My pride didn't let me admit that she was spot on.

"I have mixed feelings about being viewed as such a guy."

I automatically shrugged. So that's what they call a loss of face.

"But you know...", started Usami timidly while swinging her legs, "I still fell in love with you, so I had no other choice but to give it my best shot!"

Her earlobes were almost as red as a ripe tomato at that moment.

"You have rather peculiar tastes, don't you?"

"W-Whose fault is that!" objected the bright red Usami.

Even her sentimental and simplistic side, which would normally be viewed as a weak point, added only to her loveliness in conjunction with her straightforward and diligent nature.

She reminded me of a certain remark.

«Someone once said that girls in love are invincible.»

Usami pointed her finger straight at me before my nose.

"But one day I will hear you say that you love me! *Definitely!*"

Her timidity went somewhere far away, replaced by her usual vigor.

However, I noticed that her little finger was trembling slightly.

That pet-like girl named Usami struggles doing so many things I can do easily, but at times she accomplishes feats which I can only dream of.

As was true of her confession as well.

It might be a little exaggerated, but I admired Usami. Most likely, because she had traits I could not even wish for.

And so she looked most impressive to me at this very moment, making me want to just

take her in my arms.

However, I deliberately went another way.

"Interesting. Please give your best!" I said, making an unimpressed face on purpose.
"But let me warn you: don't think I'd fall that easily for a girl like you!"

"What did you just say?! Keep those words in mind!"

"Yeah yeah."

"Dammit! I'll show you what a good woman is!"

I couldn't help it. After all I am a "not so simple" weirdo who thinks an angry Usami is the cutest of all of them.

And once again I arrived at the same conclusion: I would have been so delighted if she were the one I loved the most.

It was also that moment when I became fully aware that there was one person on my mind whom I could not ignore.

The next day. It had been raining continuously since morning.

My feelings towards her were swaying in an unsure state. Too impure to be called love, yet too strong to be called interest.

It was the first time in my life that I was overcome by emotions. But if this was the price I had to pay for my autonomous mode of life, I was ready to accept and deal with that discomfort.

Of course, it was no doubt the murder recipe that put a brake on my feelings.

I am most definitely not averse to mysterious girls, but even I feel a tiny bit uneasy when it comes to endorsing a secret that exceeds the bounds of good sense.

Murder being one example thereof.

It is not easy to accept a person who may have killed someone. Not only because of

ethical reasons, but also because one rebels instinctually, fearing that one might become the next target.

In any event, in fact there was a break-out solution.

It was simple actually: I just had to go ask her directly whether or not she had killed anyone.

If she answered "No", I could dismiss my exaggerated ideas with a sneer, send the crumpled murder recipe flying to the burnable trash and obtain an everyday life that was just a bit better than the status quo: a thrilling one including Youko Tsukimori.

Wasn't that sufficient to justify the venture? Asking for more would be greedy. There's always a straw that breaks the camel's back.

However, what if the answer were "Yes, I have killed someone"?

I gave thought to the fact that the content of the murder recipe was in line with the cause of her father's death. Anyone, even without a tendency to fantasize like me, should, provided these two facts, come to the conclusion that the murder recipe was written with the objective of killing her father.

Moreover, it is completely natural to consider the author of the recipe as the murderer as a consequence.

I dropped my gaze to my shoulder. Before my eyes and nose, there was a lock of black hair painting an elegant curve.

As if riding a roller coaster, a water drop slid along that smooth hair just to eventually arrive at its end and jump into the dark gray air.

I lost a little heart when I associated my own fate with the last moments of that water drop.

Probably noticing my gaze, "Mh?" she inclined her head slightly while wearing that caring sister-like smile of hers.

"I'm drawing a little nearer. Otherwise I'll get wet."

She happily snuggled up to me as though we were a couple. As a natural consequence, her handful-sized breasts were gently nudging the region around my elbow.

Devil that she was, she must have been enjoying seducing me.

But there was nothing I could do about it. It was raining and mine was the only umbrella, narrowing my options to one. Thus the distance between us was shorter than usual.

I suspected, however, that she was hiding a collapsible one in her bag. I couldn't believe that a forward thinker like her would forget her umbrella.

Of course there was but one girl in my circle of acquaintances that conformed to the above description.

Youko Tsukimori.

We had ended that day's work and were walking toward the nearby station. Seeing her to the station after work had been a regular task of mine since the day she told us of her potential stalker.

After that night, Tsukimori had told me, "I felt really safe when I was seen home by you. If it's not a bother, would you mind accompanying me all the time?"

Naturally, I had immediately refused, "No, because it is," but sadly we had been in the staffroom just then, which had instead gained me the bother of turning the whole staff, led by Mirai-san, against me: "Come on, do it!"

I had not escaped without begging off with, "Please, let's compromise with seeing her to the station!" It was truly incomprehensible.

However, life sometimes takes an unexpected turn. To my great joy, the way to the station was ideal for talking privately with her.

I waited for the moment the traffic light turned red. "When I watched the news yesterday, I started wondering—," I began, "—why do people kill?"

Actually, I hadn't watched the news the day before. But well, there was bound to have been at least one murder, considering the current state of society.

"Oh, you're quite the philosopher today, aren't you? I like your contemplative face!" she said in a voice that was strangely wet, as if not only her hair but also her voice had been hit by the rain. "Is it because of the rain? One always gets into a somewhat sentimental mood when it is raining, don't you agree? It gets you in the mood to read books you usually wouldn't."

"Indeed, if I am acting unusual today, then it might really be because of the rain."

Her words gave me the hunch that I hadn't chosen the day by chance, but because of the bad weather.

"Anyway, would you mind sharing your thoughts?"

Our background music was composed of the rain drops lapping against my umbrella, the watery sound of tires on the asphalt and the blood circulating through my veins.

"Well—"

Tsukimori brushed away the black hair that had stuck to her cheek, releasing a scent of roses.

"—Because they feel like it, perhaps."

Her voice was indifferent.

"...Because they feel like it? That's all? Do you claim that that's reason enough to kill someone?"

I was offended by her obviously negligent answer.

"That's not it."

"What do you mean? Unless you elaborate some, a mere mortal like me can't comprehend your genius, I'm afraid."

"Oh don't be angry. I'm not joking, really. I *do* think so!"

She shrugged her shoulders slightly upon noticing my sidelong glare at her.

"You see, I think that in most cases the problem could actually be solved without resorting to murder, for example if it's a grudge or a fatal tangle of jealousy. Of course there are exceptions like life insurance murder."

The traffic light changed to green. A swarm of umbrellas was set in motion, leaving behind only the red umbrella under which we stood.

"Don't you think that there are numerous ways of taking revenge or venting a grudge which are more effective than killing?"

I had trouble thinking of one, but I had *no* trouble assuming that Tsukimori knew of some.

"Every murderer has to atone appropriately for his misdeeds, be it through the law or social sanctions. There is the saying 'Live by the sword, die by the sword'. I think that applies to murder as well. Thus it is a foolish and careless method and nothing more in my opinion. There are probably many ways to call it, 'fury' or 'impulse' for instance, but it sums up to a matter of mood—a matter of 'feeling like it'—for me," she said, then added, "I consider all irrational actions as a matter of mood."

"As you say, murder might indeed be a nonsensical conduct."

I concurred with her opinion. I was even moved. But that was probably also the reason that queerly comfortable moment seemed a bit off-kilter to me.

At first glance, her well-reasoned speech made her seem like an upright model student. However, upon further thought, she was only really talking *about the means of reaching a goal*.

Put in a nutshell, she had only argued about the effectiveness of murder as a method.

Didn't that mean that she was not absolutely disapproving of murder?

"But as you admitted yourself, there are exceptions, right?"

From my diagonal angle, I could not see all of her face. Only her mouth was barely in view.

"...For example?"

And that mouth of hers was smiling.

There we stood together under a round, small umbrella, surrounded by a massive wall of rain and night.

Even though the town was filled with all kinds of sounds, painted in various colors and packed with people, I felt somewhat separated from everything, as if we were alone in an elevator at midnight.

"For example, if you were able to kill completely unnoticed."

The cause of that phenomenon was simply me: *I* had locked out the world.

At that moment, Youko Tsukimori was the totality of my world.

"Could you be a little more specific? Your twisted thoughts are too complicated for an honest person like me to understand, I'm afraid."

She affected a shrug, teasing me.

"I am talking of the perfect crime, as a third party in the know would call it if a premeditated murder was deemed an accident by all the world, rather than the crime it is."

When I was done with my explanation, Tsukimori answered, giving her full concentration.

"—Indeed, we need to draw a line between unplanned murder and a perfect crime, which you can certainly not commit just by feeling like it. You have to keep a cool head and be rational if you aim for perfection."

The focus of our discussion was fully and solely on utility and efficiency—ethics and morals were not under discussion.

"But our country's police are respected worldwide, aren't they? I hear scientific crime detection is making rapid progress, too, compared to the past. Isn't the perfect crime impossible in fact?"

She smiled as if to imply that it was all just a pipe dream.

It was then that I finally found a possible reason for the awkward feeling I had sensed

earlier:

Our conversation was clearly too unromantic for two teenagers clinging together in the midst of the street under one umbrella. And yet there I was, absorbed in it, which was most likely because that's the kind of person I am.

The death or life of someone unrelated is of no concern to me. At most I would be curious about the death of such a person. No, my only response would be curiosity.

I was very well aware of my slightly unconventional sense.

But what about her?

Would the renowned, upright Youko Tsukimori really allow such an immoral conversation? For someone as tolerant and ever-smiling as her, talking about it with me without showing the faintest displeasure should have been no problem, even if she had to hide her disfavor.

However, it didn't look like that to me.

How so? Well, because I felt that, just like me, she—enjoyed immoral topics to the fullest.

"Okay, but then as a purely hypothetical question—"

I carefully touched the left pocket of my uniform from above. Inside it was a four-times folded scrap of paper.

"—what would you do if there was a plan that made the perfect crime possible?"

I always carried the murder recipe around with me.

The next moment, she gave a smile that reminded me of the sound of a bell.

"A good question. Indeed, I might consider murder as a means of achieving an objective if I were able to commit the perfect crime. But in my case," she said with a mischievous, crescent moon smile very much to my liking, "I would never base such a

conduct on a written plan that *might* remain as proof later on. It would be ridiculous if a plan that makes the perfect crime possible caused it to fail. I think a plan should only and entirely be in one's head."

She pondered for a few moments, humming, and then added, "...if you ask me and think simply about it, it doesn't matter whether it is planned or just a product of coincidences. After all, it's a perfect crime if no one notices your willful action, right?"

Something unfolded before my eyes that exceeded my expectations. It almost went so far that I suspected I was dreaming while awake.

"It is entirely the result that determines whether a crime is perfect or not. However perfect a plan is, it's over as soon as someone else takes note. Put the other way, however 'flimsy' a plan is, it is a perfect crime as long as *no one* takes note."

Suddenly, I noticed that I was shivering.

"But don't you agree that mistakes are inherent if a human takes part? Humans *are* imperfect, after all. It's the imperfect human that makes the mistake in the very end. So, eventually I think it is the executor who holds the final key."

Not because I was cold. Not because the weather was getting dreadful. Not because she scared me.

"To sum up my thoughts, the most important condition for a perfect crime is neither a perfect plan nor a perfect execution, but a perfect human—"

I was probably trembling with excitement. Because I seemed to be extremely agitated.

She giggled.

"Laughable, isn't it? That's just another impracticable theory on paper; perfect humans do not exist after all. Well, of course the ones who are to investigate the crime are human, too, so there are mistakes on that side as well. But still I think that a perfect crime is infeasible unless you come upon a remarkable succession of coincidences."

SoICantHaveKilledMyFatherRightNonomiyaKun?

Perhaps my warped personality was just playing with me, but I couldn't help thinking that that was what she proclaimed.

I shook my head strongly.

"Highly doubtful."

I turned towards her and looked into her big almond eyes. "Why?" she asked, giving a moon-like smile again, while reflecting me on her retina.

"You lied. You claimed there were no perfect humans in the world—but I know of at least one in my vicinity."

She didn't ask "Who?" but only nodded briefly, "I see."

...She got me there. That way it was only funnier!

It was all Youko Tsukimori's fault that I was more talkative than usual and felt my heart throb with excitement.

Why were the thrilling conversations with her so amusing?

Perhaps I was simply drawing pleasure from talking about immoral topics—but what if the other party hadn't been her? Would it have been just as enjoyable?

On the one hand, I tended to be annoyed by her behavior, but on the other hand, there seemed to be some anticipation of associating with her deep within my heart.

So did it even matter what we would talk about? By associating with her, wasn't I just seeking a thrill that hadn't existed in my previous everyday life because of the murder recipe? Wasn't *that* the reason why I—unconsciously—kept on walking a tightrope without getting to the point?

Wasn't I afraid of awaking and being drawn back to the boring reality if I confronted her with the murder recipe?

There was no sense of justice in my actions. There was only interest, curiosity and the desire to learn more about her.

So all I wanted might have been a link to the fascinating person named Youko Tsukimori.

However, at the same time I also wanted to make sure whether she really had used the murder recipe to kill her father. I contradicted myself.

—Yes. I was about to make the next step towards her.

I was craving knowledge of a face of hers that no one knew.

The green light of the traffic light started to blink again. The nth red light awaited us.

The rain still showed no sign of weakening and hit the asphalt in a steady rhythm. The crush of people heading towards the station, however, had become sparse as the temperature dropped in town.

I recovered my breath silently so that she wouldn't notice my growing excitement. Then I slowly led my fingers through between my buttons, reaching into my inside pocket.

—I had made up my mind. I intended to ask her directly about the murder recipe.

But then, all of a sudden, Tsukimori embraced me from the front. I was caught with my fingers still in my pocket, unable to take them out.

"...I'm cold," murmured Tsukimori along with a white sigh before I could raise my voice in surprise.

Her upward-glance was watery, her black hair soaked, the way she leaned against me with all her weight sexy, and her beautiful lips at my chin's height seemed to beg for a kiss.

The soft touch I could feel beyond her uniform was still the same, but she had grown cold indeed.

It *was* my mistake to have her talk that long in a wet state, but neither was I crazy nor so experienced in love matters as to hug a girl with all the eyes of the town upon us just because of that.

I put my hands on her shoulders, wanting to release myself from her embrace, but she immediately shook her head, stubbornly saying, "No!" and hugged me even stronger. Contrary to her childish attitude, her body was more than mature enough to give rise to some complicated feelings on my part.

It was then that I felt a vibration at Tsukimori's breasts, which were pressed against me.

"...what a shame for the good mood."

While making a regretful face, she took her mobile phone out of her chest pocket. It was quite ticklish when she operated it at zero distance.

I slid my hand out of my jacket and tucked it into a pocket of my trousers. My excitement was entirely spoiled by that intrusive phone call.

"...Yes, Youko speaking."

Her expression became earnest promptly after she had begun the conversation.

"...my mother? No, I haven't heard of anything. She was at home when I left for school this morning."

As they exchanged words, her expression got darker and darker. I couldn't perceive what the caller was saying, but it was obviously not good news.

"...Yes. I understand. I'll return. Yes. If I find out something I will immediately give you a call."

She cut the connection and let out a tired sigh.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

She gazed at me with watery eyes for a few seconds, hesitating.

"...my mother was absent without notice from the cooking school she works at," she replied at last, "She would never do that. Thus, someone of the staff was worrying about her and gave me a call."

"Maybe she's sick?"

I voiced a cheap word of consolation.

"I wonder... he told me that he has tried calling our home number several times. Of course, he tried her mobile as well. But it didn't connect, so he called me, her daughter, since I might know something..."

She cut off her sentence and started to ponder, furling her long eyebrows.

I let out a sigh. Somehow I sensed that nothing but trouble was waiting for me.

"Let's hurry home."

I grabbed her cold hand firmly and walked towards the station, pulling her behind me.

"...eh?"

I heard her confused voice from diagonally behind.

"Seems like you're in for some trouble, so I won't stop you any longer and go home," I said quickly. "—Saying that would have suited me better, I guess... But seeing you make such a face, how should I leave you to your own devices? Besides, I don't even want to think about Mirai-san's reaction if I left you at this point."

To my plain remark, she replied: "This warped side of your personality is so lovely."

I heard her pleased voice from diagonally behind.

Thinking that she was teasing me, I promptly searched for a nice objection. However, when she whispered, "...Thanks," at my ear and I felt her freezing fingers that held firmly to me, I became unable to complain.

Not a soul was to be seen in the dark and cold residential area. The ceaseless rain falling upon us conjured up a sense of isolation in me, notwithstanding that Tsukimori was by my side.

We hurried up the long, steep stairs, at which end *that* house awaited us—with its very unique geometrical design that made it stand out from the rest of the rich neighborhood.

Tsukimori had tried countless times calling her home phone and her mother's mobile phone on the way, but the only voice she got to hear was the response of the answering machine. Because of pressing restlessness, I suspect, I heard none of her easygoing remarks anymore by the time we reached our destination.

Pathetic though it was, I found myself unable to find the right words to console her.

I followed Tsukimori through the entrance. There was an absolute silence inside.

The end of the long corridor blended with the darkness. The dire situation made it seem to me as if we had lost our way into an eerie haunt of devils.

When I took off my loafers at the entrance, she said, "...you'll catch cold. Wait a moment, I'll get you a towel."

While swiftly proceeding through the dark corridor, Tsukimori confidently flipped several switches on the wall, filling the house gradually with light.

I slowly walked through the lit corridor to the living room, where I started to wait for her.

I gazed at the arrangement which had remained unchanged from last time, and as it had then, the tranquility made my ears sensitive. Thinking back, we were alone that night.

So this time we were probably alone, too.

No one else was here. That's what my intuition told me the moment I had made my first step into the building.

Well, of course it was possible that her mother had collapsed somewhere in the house, but judging from what Tsukimori said when she returned, "When I went to fetch the towel, I also peeked into several rooms, but I didn't find her. She might not be here....," her mother *was* absent.

"I just hope she hasn't been involved in some accident..."

I smiled at the pondering Tsukimori.

"But maybe it's not such a big deal and she just didn't feel like going to work because of all the rain today, you know."

"You mean she simply ditched work?"

"Well, I, for one, often seriously consider escaping from school or work and going out somewhere when I ride my bike on nice days."

I found my own remark laughable.

"I hope so."

But thanks to her laughing faintly, I was spared from self-loathing.

"Perhaps there's a message for you somewhere? A note or something that says where she is and what she's doing?"

"You're right. I'll take a look."

Tsukimori nodded cheerfully at my suggestion. Apparently, she had regained her usual composure.

I unobtrusively followed Tsukimori into the kitchen.

As much as I felt bad about taking advantage of her worries about her mother's safety, I certainly did not intend to miss out on a chance to openly search her home.

An elegant system kitchen with a yellow theme filled my view.

"As expected from a teacher at a cooking school," I commented on the large fridge, the unfamiliar cookware and the various ingredients.

"Made in Italy if I remember correctly."

While Tsukimori was inspecting the kitchen, I looked around without anything better to do and took one of her mother's cookbooks to flick through it.

I didn't actually hope to find a message. Would be nice if there was one. Personally, I hoped much more to find something related to the murder recipe.

For example—a bit of new information about the recipe.

I was aware that I was being indiscreet. However, in all honesty I was fond of that kind of mood. I was enjoying a thrill comparable to detective work or exploring a cave for a treasure.

"It looks like there is nothing here. Maybe in her room...?" said Tsukimori gloomily and left the kitchen, wordlessly followed by me.

She opened one of the doors alongside the corridor. The instant the door went open, I could smell the overly sweet scent of perfume.

The walls were covered with white wallpaper, a curtain decorated with lace, a

dressing table against the wall and a dresser that was laden with countless makeup goods. It was obviously the room of her mother.

"You get on well with your mother, don't you?"

"Yes, certainly not badly."

On the nightstand by the bed, which had a flower pattern, there were several picture frames, each of which depicted Tsukimori and her mother.

"Did your parents sleep separately?"

There was only one bed in the room - a bed for one person only.

"I have always thought this way was natural, but is it more common that spouses sleep in one room, after all? Well, it probably is. Perhaps they did so because both of them had to work, and I guess it was more convenient this way due to those circumstances."

"At my place, both the parents sleep together, whether peacefully or not I couldn't say, in a king-size bed. But judging from the 'I woke up in the middle of the night because you kept stealing my blanket', which I often hear my mother shout in the early morning, I guess they get on well."

She flashed a warm smile while listening to me.

"You have fantastic parents."

Therefore, I just answered expressionlessly, "They're normal."

"I don't want to stay too long in a lady's room," I said and left the room quickly to wait in the corridor. I was merely annoyed by the overly-sweet perfume.

I asked Tsukimori, who was searching the area around the dressing table in the meanwhile: "Where is your father's room?"

I can't say I had no ulterior motive.

"You can find it just on the opposite side."

Neither can I deny that this was a pretext to explore her house on my own.

"We should probably search separately. I'll look through the room of your father."

But it's also true that I wanted to do a good deed, much as it didn't suit me, and help her out at least a little after seeing her behaving with such maturity.

"That would be a great help. But his room might be a little dusty. It has been left untouched since his passing...", said Tsukimori apologetically.

"I don't mind," I replied and headed towards the door opposite.

My first impression was that it looked like a library.

All of the books that covered one wall of the room dealt with construction, which I noticed when I fixed my eyes on their spines. On the shiny silver desk was a large pile of books and a desktop PC. Both sides of the desk were equipped with a cordless telephone each. I figured that this room served as both his library and working area.

As Tsukimori had warned me, my steps left behind footprints outlined in dust on the floor. There was also a lot of dust on the window frames.

I stopped. I had registered a sound.

According to Tsukimori, that room was supposed to be untouched. But still a subtle sound resembling the buzz of a mosquito reached my ears.

It was the sound of a small fan.

I stood before the silver desk. The PC seemed to be turned on, though in sleep mode. I pressed a random key.

"—Tsukimori."

The instant I saw the display, I called her name.

She then came from the neighboring room and, squinting one eye, asked, "Mm?".

"This," I said, pointing at the screen.

Indeed, her mother had left a note with a message.

"That's...", she muttered, surprised, and kept silent, staring at the screen, as though

time had frozen. The only sounds in the room was the rain hitting the window and the regular buzzing of the computer fan.

At the time, I could do nothing but watch her beautiful yet so sorrowful face from the side.

Her mother's name was typed in the "notepad" on the screen, along with the following short comment.

«I'm sorry»

On that day, I didn't get home until past three at night in a police car.

[Cigarette Tiger]

When I went to school that morning, fighting with my drowsiness, Tsukimori was nowhere to be seen in the classroom.

Of course there was nobody in the class who hadn't noticed her absence.

Usami had been peeking at me since I walked in, probably eager to question me about Tsukimori.

It wasn't like her to be so hesitant. Perhaps she was still mindful of the fact that she had confessed to me the other day.

I could only picture too well how Usami may have writhed and rolled on her bed in heavy regret over her careless confession.

Suddenly, our eyes met. She immediately dropped her gaze, while the exposed part of her ears and her neck turned bright red.

Apparently, I was spot on in my prediction.

I couldn't help smiling while watching the cute behavior she was showing.

"What's wrong, Usami?"

"...Eh! W-What? What? What should be wrong?" she stammered with such vigor that she started up to her feet.

"Isn't there something you want to ask me?"

"N-No! I don't want to ask! Not yet! I need a little more time to prepare myself! I don't want to hear it yet!"

Ah, so that was it.

While sighing in my mind, I helped her calm down by asking warmly, "Don't you want to ask me about Tsukimori?"

"...Aah, that's what you're talking about...", sighed Usami in blatant relief. "Yeah, right, why is she absent today?"

Usami, sitting at her desk right next to mine, cocked her head to and fro like a pygmy marmoset.

"Beats me. But maybe she caught a cold in the rain yesterday?" I replied ambiguously.

Neither Tsukimori nor the police had forbidden me to talk about the disappearance of her mother, but I didn't intend to tell my classmates anything in relation to that matter. I was being considerate of Tsukimori.

I was perfectly aware that it didn't suit my character to sympathize with her, but I couldn't help it because I had seen her in a horribly disheartened state, much worse than I could have ever imagined of her.

Besides, if I told anyone about her mother, I was bound to be grilled by the others about how I knew. Just by picturing what would head my way if my classmates, especially Kamogawa and Usami, got wind of my visit to her home, I felt signs of a headache. This kind of self-protection was also included in the rather ambiguous answer I gave her.

I was tired from the all-nighter I had pulled and from overusing my brains; the least I wanted was any more trouble.

"Maybe I should visit Youko-san...?"

No, as I said, enough of the trouble.

I sighed and asked with a reproving look, "...what about your club?"

"Um..."

Usami looked up at me like a puppy assessing its master's mood.

"Don't even think about skipping," I warned her.

"...Right, I knew you'd say that..."

Usami collapsed on her desk.

"If so, then don't take it into your head in the first place!"

"But I'm worried!"

Usami purged her lips, still lying prostrate on her desk.

"I merely said it *might* be a cold. We don't know for sure. You can give her a short call if she doesn't come tomorrow either."

As bothersome as it was, it seemed that I had no choice but to contact Tsukimori and inform her of the cold she had caught. Jeez, it's not easy to tell lies.

But my exhaustion was relieved a little by the heartwarming sight of Usami docilely nodding with her soft cheek placed on her desk.

"Mm, okay."

The time at school went by more peacefully than usual.

Tsukimori's absence from the classroom was the cause, which also explained why Kamogawa and his colleagues were quieter than usual.

It had been quite a while since I last had my peace.

Youko Tsukimori had taken a special position in my life since the day I had picked up that sheet. Of course, I am talking of a different kind of "special" than the others.

I, only I, knew about her secret—the murder recipe.

I had been watching her with caution and with the recipe at the back of my mind. I had socialized with her with the utmost care because I suspected she had killed her father.

As a consequence, I had never had much peace with her around me. However, those days were drawing to a close, it seemed.

I touched my left breast pocket.

"...I guess soon it's goodbye to you as well."

I was surprised by the gloomy mutter that escaped my mouth so naturally.

Apparently, the days that revolved around nothing but Tsukimori and the murder recipe had been dearer to me than I had thought.

That was probably the reason for the slight loneliness I was feeling at returning to my previous, peaceful everyday life.

In regards to the various happenings concerning the murder recipe, I had come to a conclusion.

Youko Tsukimori has not killed anyone.

I knew of no one as intelligent and stubborn as her, though measuring someone of such singularity with normal common sense might be starting from a false premise.

However, in my eyes she had been just a normal girl when she behaved like a caring sister at the her father's funeral, and when she stood stone-still before the screen showing her mother's last words, or what I supposed them to be anyway.

Hadn't she said herself that murder was a "foolish and careless method"? As clever as she was — cleverer than anyone else I knew in fact — she would have never — under no circumstances — relied on murder. At least I couldn't explain to myself why she would have done it.

In the end, I could not view her as someone who would kill.

On went the days without Youko Tsukimori.

The first day remained peaceful. On the second day, however, there was already a commotion in the class; everyone feared for Tsukimori's safety.

As expected, their attention was immediately directed at me because I worked at the same café. As planned, I played dumb.

And then what happened? Assumptions brought forth assumptions, which eventually turned into rumors. Thus, Youko Tsukimori's name was omnipresent at school on the

third day.

She is in hospital because her cold worsened. She has been kidnapped and is kept in confinement. She is in the middle of filming a movie at Hollywood. A prince fell in love with her at first sight and took her to his country to marry her. Such absurd rumors were all over the place. I could only laugh dryly.

Whether she was here or not, she was always in the center of attention. Once more I was shown just how much the girl stood out.

On the fourth day, however, some rumors came in circulation that weren't funny at all.

Tsukimori is helping the police with their search by contacting friends and acquaintances of her mother and by heading to places where she expects her mother to go. Exerting herself to the utmost, even limiting her sleep as much as possible.

The origin of that rumor turned out to be a student who had someone in the police department in his family.

The message spread epidemically. Underpinned by further sources that confirmed her mother's disappearance, the rumor had become fact on the next Monday.

Then, after one week had passed. The long-lasting rain stopped, giving way to a cloudless blue sky.

In the early morning of that day, her mother was found at last.

But as a decedent.

She was found on the slope of a hill that was a stone's throw from the high-class residential area.

On its top, there was a little park which had a view of the entire town. The park was surrounded by a cliff and therefore bounded by a fence, which was, however, old and low enough that an adult could easily climb over it.

Where she had been found implied that she had fallen from that park.

The reasons given for her late discovery were that she hadn't reached the foot of the slope and that she had been concealed by the wildly blooming azaleas that covered the entire side of the hill.

According to the officer who went to confirm the find, he had never seen such a beautiful corpse. The appearance of her mother, decorated by purple flowers, compared to a framed western painting, he stated. He had found himself forgetting that it was a corpse for several moments, probably bemused by the smell of the blooming azaleas.

Imagining that scene made me shiver. I would have loved to witness that moment.

The news of her mother's death spread out at school as a wave of surprise and settled down as great pity for the poor girl Youko Tsukimori who had lost yet another close relative.

I had a normal amount of pity for Tsukimori. She also had my condolences about what happened to her mother.

However, unlike everyone else I wasn't surprised. I had expected the casualty.

Why? Because I had come to the conclusion that *her mother* had used the murder recipe to kill her father.

There were two reasons.

Firstly, her family environment.

At the funeral I heard that father, mother and daughter had all been amiable and kept on good terms with their neighbors. Moreover, the misery her mother was going through came across extremely well when she was crying before his photograph.

I had imagined the Tsukimoris as a harmonious family with a harmonious relationship between husband and wife.

When I saw her mother's bedroom, however, I couldn't help but entertain doubts.

The fact that Tsukimori wasn't concerned about her parents sleeping separately implied that they weren't quite the harmonious family. But in the first place, it was generally doubtful whether a married couple could be called harmonious while having separate bedrooms.

Grounded on that fact, I framed the hypothesis that their relationship was exactly the

opposite of what was generally understood and actually bad. The fact that her father was nowhere to be seen in any photograph in her mother's room was yet another clue that strengthened my hypothesis.

Secondly, and decisively, the author of the murder recipe.

I had been wondering since the very beginning: Why name it "recipe"? Isn't it a "plan"? In terms of content "murder plan" would have been appropriate.

But while I didn't use the word "recipe" very frequently, I figured that a teacher at a cooking school would make quite regular use of it.

When I went to Tsukimori's home because her mother had gone missing, I secretly snarfed a bit of evidence.

Namely a handwritten memo that contained additional explanations to some recipe in a cookbook.

The content was irrelevant. What was important was that it had been handwritten by her mother.

I compared the murder recipe with the memo and they looked exactly the same. The handwriting made it evident that they had been written by the same person.

In other words, the secret behind the incidents around the murder recipe was most likely something along the lines of:

The mother, who was on bad terms with the father, wrote and executed the murder recipe, making her husband the victim of an accident, but was unable to bear the sin and thus ended her own life.

In that case, there was no need to pity her mother. She got what she deserved, coldly speaking. There was no particular emotion in my heart with the exception of a slight cling to the cat-and-mouse game that had ended now.

The murder recipe lost its lustre. My delusions around it had come to a close with the death of her mother.

I supposed that it would end up as a memento deep in one of my drawers and never see the light of day again.

Of course, these were all just assumptions of mine.

I didn't deny that there were several missing pieces which were merely complemented by my own imagination. But I thought that a normal high school student couldn't come any closer to the truth. Above all, I was satisfied with the solution I had worked out.

Therefore, I didn't intend to get Youko Tsukimori's confirmation.

One day I might ask her about this incident, but not now.

I wanted to use this moment to revel in relief.

In relief that she hadn't killed anyone.

Luckily or not, these tranquil days didn't last long.

What brought the change were the words of a police detective whom I had come to know at a recent event.

My first encounter with him goes back to the night when Tsukimori's mother went missing—

—Immediately after I had discovered the message on the screen, I called the police and informed them for Tsukimori, who was standing still in shock.

After thirty minutes during which there was a silence except for the ticking of the clock and the rain, a police car arrived. A uniformed man and a tall, suited man alighted.

"Ah, yes, yes. I see, I see. Yeah, 'could be a suicide note!" uttered the tall cop casually. He had introduced himself as Konan.

I had once experienced the questioning of the police in the past. It was a shoplifting incident in the neighborhood that had happened a few years ago.

That time, two police detectives had payed us a visit. Rather than posing questions, they had chiefly just warned us of the shoplifter who was still on the run.

Those detectives had both been quite nonchalant and had worn trench coats and plain, unremarkable suits, which made them look like office workers. Their atmosphere, however, was clearly different from ordinary citizens. The sharp glances they had flashed from time to time were quite intimidating.

I had understood very well that this was the "authority" of a policeman who was always exposed to utmost danger.

Incidentally, I learned in the news afterward that the shoplifter had been arrested in the midst of questioning.

Forward in time, the man named Konan didn't match my idea of a detective.

His looks suggested that he was in his late twenties. Well, judging by the power relationship between him and the young police officer, he might have been a little older.

Wearing a slender dark blue suit with white stripes, Konan seemed much more like a gaudy gigolo than a detective.

As his frivolous look implied, he chattered constantly, and thus was classified as the kind of human I "disliked" most.



"Oh, now you're a cute one. Are you in the show biz? No? You should enter! You'd beat them all in cuteness! No, no, I mean it! By the way, how old are you, Youko-chan? Seventeen? U-huh... How many sisters do you have? Older ones, mind you. Oh, you don't have any? Not a single one? Really? So you're an only child. What a pity. It's truly a pity. Ah, but right! I bet your mom's hot as well, and still young, right? I see! As I thought! Hey, heard her? We've gotta find that lady!"

Konan kept talking, paying no attention to the police officer on the other sofa who was visibly bashful. I hadn't liked Konan from the word go, but after just a few minutes I "hated" him.

His lack of consideration towards Tsukimori was not even the main problem. I mean, didn't he belong to the police? Was *that* the appropriate attitude towards a downhearted girl whose mother had just gone missing?

Konan was an incomprehensible and downright disagreeable man.

The young police officer asked us two, three questions about the incident in place of his superior, such as "Did your mother seem bothered by something?" and "Do you know where she might have gone?"

Tsukimori cast down her long eyelashes with a sigh and shook her black hair left and right, "I have no idea."

In a thoughtfully calm voice, the young officer told her, "I'm afraid to say that it is possible that your mother has gone missing due to suicide. We will do everything in our power to find her, but please be prepared for the worst case."

Instead of a reply Tsukimori only nodded weakly.

Her sparse movements and taciturnity gave her a cold yet beautiful touch, almost like a well-crafted doll.

As endlessly tactless as it was, I daydreamed of toying freely with her dollish, fragile, slender nape and her crimson lips that contrasted so beautifully with her white skin. I had already noticed at the funeral of her father that Tsukimori would give off a special tranquil mood akin to the moon at midnight when sorrowful, the look of which could never grow stale for me.

Unable to answer any of the questions and forced to listen to the lengthy speeches of that frivolous man, I was bored and pained, but thanks to a cup of coffee in one hand

and the opportunity to fully enjoy the "moon", I managed to have a somewhat worthwhile time.

After a while had passed like that, Konan suddenly asked me, "By the way, you are...?"

I told him my name, concealing my wariness.

"Okay, Nonomiya-kun, we'll give you a ride home. It's already past one in the morning; there's no line you could take anymore, right?" offered Konan.

Tsukimori, right next to me, gave me an emphatic and requesting glance. I wavered at first, but then I came to a decision and bowed before Konan, "Please."

When I left, she whispered reproachfully into my ear, "I didn't want to be alone tonight," and grabbed my uniform weakly.

I feigned ignorance and carefully shook off her fingers.

Of course I didn't feel comfortable leaving her all alone. Of course, my presence wouldn't have changed anything about the situation, but at least I would have been able to be by her side as someone to talk to. It would have definitely been worth it if that had let her forget her grief a little, even if it was just some cheap pity from me.

However, I couldn't bring myself to fire the curiosity of Konan, who was grinning at Tsukimori and me.

To my surprise, Konan followed suit when I sat down on one of the backseats.

Noticing my astonished look, he laughed, "Ah, 'just wanted to have a quick chat with you."

Somehow, I sensed the authority of a detective in his laugh.

During the ride from Tsukimori's home to mine, Konan and I kept on talking. Eighty percent was his words, though.

"You're Youko-chan's boyfriend, aren't you? Eh? You're not? But didn't you go visit her? Listen up, a guy doesn't normally enter the house of a girl at such a late hour unless she's not his girlfriend. Aah, workmates, huh. And classmates too. Uh-huh, uh-huh, so there's nothing going on between you. Well, you must understand that your nice

friend and helper was about to get jealous of you and your hot girl! Right? Don't you agree? Hey, look ahead while you're driving! Well, it was me that addressed you, though! Heh!" joked Konan while involving the young police officer who was at the wheel. "Anyway, this is my phone number, my new buddy. Don't hesitate to call; *it's my business phone*. What I mean by that? Oh, I just wanted to make clear that I'm 'straight'. I may not look like it, but I can't get enough ladies! Mh? I *do* look like it? People say that to me all the time for some reason. Huh? That's not what you wanted to know? Aah, don't hold back because talking helps the investigation. When we're looking for someone we're grateful for any information we can get. You never know what could be the decisive clue; even if it seems like nothing to you. You might deny that you're dating Youko-chan, but from what I've seen and heard from her, I'm pretty sure you're quite close. So should you remember or find out something concerning Youko-chan or her mother, give me a call."

Afterward, Konan called me on a regular basis.

It might go without saying, but each and every one of those calls was quite long.

Of course, I was extremely annoyed by his long chats and I still disliked him. What made me play his dialog partner, however, was the idea that I might just as well take advantage of him since he tried to do so with me.

In return for telling him all I knew, I wormed the current state of the investigation out of him. That exchange was pretty unbalanced to the disadvantage of Konan, though, because the information I gave him was obvious and widely-known without exception. The question arises, whether he babbled the current state because of his inborn chatter nature or because he considered it minor enough to leak.

At any rate, I always had interest in his calls, whatever the subject.

In spite of my personal opinion of Konan, I was intrigued with the peculiar job of a detective, and his stories suited my hobby of imagining stuff rather well.

At last the matter settled down and Youko Tsukimori was about to return to school and to work.

On the day before, however, a certain male customer appeared at Victoria right before closing time.

"Ah, now I see why you haven't shown interest in girls, Nonomiya," said Mirai-san with her fingers on her chin, staring at a slender, suited man who had taken a seat at a table.

Completing the image, that gigolo-like man was cheerfully waving towards the kitchen — to me.

"I'll deliberately refrain from asking what exactly you were imagining, but allow me to assure you that you are wrong."

"What is he then? A friend? That would be quite the old friend for you."

"No, he is a detective."

"*That* guy? No matter how you look at it, that's a gigolo if you ask me," she said and became even more doubtful. "So, what misdeed have you committed? Sure, I've always thought you'd wander from the path some day, but—"

"Mirai-san."

"What is it, criminal?"

"I think I need to have a good talk with you one of these days."

"Am I wrong?"

"You are. I had dealings with him, he's called Konan by the way, during the investigation of Tsukimori's mother."

"I see...", she said while furrowing her brow and put a piece of almond chocolate into her mouth.

Probably she was sympathizing with Tsukimori. Now that I think about it, she had been rather quiet during the time Tsukimori wasn't there. Well, the same applies to the manager and Saruwatari-san.

Apparently, Youko Tsukimori had become an indispensable part of the Victoria staff by now.

"So? Why would that detective Konan come to meet you?"

"I have no idea! I want to know that myself."

Then, suddenly, Mirai-san rounded her eyes.

"Uwa! Hey! Nonomiya! That cop just winked at me!"

"He's a player, just as he looks."

"Aah, I wanna pound his face in so badly..."

"Please don't. He's a policeman all the same."

"You should seriously give some more thought to who you hang out with."

"Indeed..."

I definitely didn't want to get a sermon from her, but to my chagrin she was absolutely right.

When I brought the ordered coffee to Konan, who naturally had no clue of my uneasiness, a torrent of words sprang up.

"Now that's what I call a sharp glance. I felt like some alien bug in her eyes. Gives me a thrill! You may not believe it, but I'm not averse to M and that stuff. I'm a sucker for those, um, dominant women, you know. What's her name? How old is she? Is she already taken? Please, Nonomiya-kun, introduce me to her!" he jabbered while staring at Mirai-san in the kitchen as if he didn't know the word "reserve".

"Have you nothing better to do than lurk here?"

"As if! I don't even get round to going on dates! Ah, but I won't tell you whether there is a girl I can date, youngster."

"I couldn't care less."

"You never change, huh," he sneered and took a sip of his coffee. "Wow!" he smiled happily to himself. "I wish there *was* a peaceful day once in a while. But even in a small town like this there's always something happening. Thanks to that, business is unfortunately thriving. 24/7."

Konan pulled a funny face and held both his hands before him.

"Then shouldn't you stop loafing around here all the more?" I asked, upon which he put on a bitter mien.

"Do you even have a heart? We policemen are human too, you know? Don't be so rough with us!" he darted me a reproachful look, "One or two cups shouldn't be too much to ask for," he led his cup of coffee to his mouth.

My question was not meant sarcastically. I had asked because I really wondered.

Now that the case of Tsukimori's mother was solved, he should have no reason to see me. As a matter of fact, we hadn't spoken since her mother had been found.

I *had* told him that Victoria's coffee was delicious, but it was more than unlikely that he came here today of all days just for the coffee.

Then, as if directly answering my doubts, Konan added, "You're free in a few moments, right? Do you have some time for me afterwards? Wanna go to a restaurant at the station for a chat? I'll even treat you to something! But let me warn you: it's not a date. Don't get that wrong!"

Now I understood. It was no coincidence that he came shortly before closing time; he wanted something from me.

I nodded, "Sure."

I had not the slightest idea what he wanted from me, but as I didn't loath the conversations with this unconventional detective, I had no reason to refuse either.

After work I went to the specified restaurant at the station, where Konan promptly discovered me and waved at me.

Since it was a weekend, the shop was crowded with all sorts of people, young and old.

The moment I sat down opposite him, Konan held out the menu card to me.

"Choose whatever you like."

"Okay, what's the most expensive item?"

Pleased with my answer, he laughed heartedly, "I like that heedless side of yours."

"By the way, so what do you want from me?" I asked while flipping through the menu with my finger tips.

"I was wondering if you could answer me some questions about Youko-chan."

Before I knew it, I found myself staring at him.

"Don't scowl at me like that! It's not like I want to steal her from you."

"It's a riddle to me what you mean by that."

"I'll have a smoke," he said while putting a cigarette into his mouth. He adeptly lighted it with a lighter that had the name of some bar printed on it.

"...Why?"

Doubts towards him started to arise in me.

"Mmm... do you mind it if I can't give you any detailed reasons?"

"If it's a personal request, I might bring myself to answer you..."

Was there anyone in this restaurant that recognized that he was a police detective?

"Well, Youko-chan's pretty, so I can't say that no personal interest is included, but basically it's work-related."

"Duty of confidentiality?"

"Pretty much, yeah. You know, I have to be careful in my position. So don't be offended if I'm a little unclear."

Konan grinned at me.

When he smiled like that, his eyes always got even sharper than they usually were. That probably happened without his awareness, though.

He exuded a kind of authority, whose contrast with his smiling mouth gave me the shivers. That might have been the sovereignty of someone who was always exposed to utmost danger.

No matter what he looked like, Konan was no doubt a policeman.

"...are you doubting Tsukimori?"

The instant I asked, he wrinkled his brow strongly and took a deep drag.

"...you ask me that straight-out? Being sharp is one thing, but it's a hell of a combination if you've also got some guts. Nonomiya-kun, interested in joining the police some day? You would make a good detective."

"I'm horrible at sports, so I'll decline with thanks."

"Uh-huh. Well, at least don't become a criminal then! If a guy like you sides with them, we policemen are going to have a hard time," he joked and stopped a waitress by raising his hand. "Have something," he urged, so I ordered the most expensive-looking item on the menu: a Chaliapin steak

After confirming the order, the waitress disappeared into the kitchen.

"To get right to the point, I think that in this incident—there is a possibility of murder," stated Konan without any concern.

"...wasn't that supposed to be secret?"

"For appearance's sake, you know. I did fulfill my duty as a policeman, but now it's at my own discretion," he pressed the cigarette against the ashtray, "I never planned on being quiet about it. I haven't known you very long, but I know that you're a clever boy. You would have found out anyway."

"You have a fairly high opinion of me, don't you?"

Konan, grinning slightly, seemed pleased with my suspicious look.

"But it's not idle talk; I'm honest about it. Of course it's also true that I do have an ulterior motive of sorts, specifically that I would like to have you on my side."

On hearing the word "ulterior motive", I immediately recalled our first encounter several days ago. "Ah, 'just wanted to have a quick chat," he had said at the time.

"During the search, you know, I've been nosing around here and there and I arrived at the conclusion that no one is closer to Youko-chan than you at the moment. So I thought you'd be my man if I wanted to know something about her."

It had been a riddle to me: why had Konan sought a conversation with me? Why had he given me detailed information about the progress of the search?

Now that I thought about it, Konan had never been interested in Tsukimori's mother only. From day one he also wanted information about Tsukimori herself from me.

If my guess was right, then from the beginning, Konan had...

"—you've been suspecting that Tsukimori might have killed her mother all along, haven't you?" I asked calmly.

Instead of answering, Konan took a gulp of water from his glass.

The waitress then brought my steak menu. I accepted it, whereas Konan ordered another cup of coffee.

There were many customers in the wide restaurant, but ours was the most outrageous topic for sure. I found myself enjoying that odd situation a little.

After confirming with a sidelong glance that the waitress had gone, Konan finally spoke again, "In the police you have to take *any* possibility into consideration in any case. So yeah, *strictly speaking* that potentiality had to be considered since the start."

It was an affirmation, but an unusually passive one—probably because of the sensitivity of the matter.

But it wasn't a denial, either.

Just then, the slumbering murder recipe awoke in my mind.

Did the police perhaps know about it and therefore doubt Tsukimori?

I noticed I had a dry mouth. I seemed to be tense.

"It's not fair to compare them, but the coffee at your place was on a completely different level," said Konan with a sour expression after taking a sip of his coffee.

The window at the corner of my vision showed a bored high school student. Fortunately, I was good at making a poker face.

"...What would be her motive?"

Her motive was the most unclear point if one was to doubt Youko Tsukimori.

She'd had no reason to kill her mother. At least, I couldn't think of one. This was another crucial reason why I concluded that she was innocent.

My question was based on curiosity about what the police had in their hands, but Konan only said bluntly, "No clue. It's quite a mystery, isn't it? I mean, she wasn't on bad terms with her parents or something... it's the reason why I asked for your help, so yeah, pretty much beats me."

From the looks of it, he really had no idea.

What made him doubt Tsukimori, then?

Did that mean that they *did* know about the recipe, after all? Or had they obtained some kind of proof I didn't know of?

Konan smiled broadly at me when I suddenly kept silent, "Now, don't brood too much about it! It's really just a possibility. Dotting the i's and crossing the t's is my job, you know. So, no offense!"

"None taken," I pulled myself together with a smile, "...I was just wondering why you doubt Tsukimori even though she has no motive."

Maintaining a smile, I moistened my throat with some water.

The question was how well Konan knew Tsukimori.

Konan maintained his smile, too, and said in a confident voice, "It's not normal to lose two family members in such a short time, now is it?"

I couldn't keep myself from agreeing "I see."

"I clearly smell a rat there. Therefore, I have no choice but to take some sort of action, because I'm a member of the police, you know. If it turns out to be just an unhappy coincidence, our work ends right there. So, to sum up, I'm confirming that at the moment!"

I nodded once again, "I see."

I was surprised. No, "bewildered" would be more accurate.

My doubts about Youko Tsukimori were supposed to be cleared. However, Konan's argument made perfect sense to me.

"...have you confronted Tsukimori with that matter?"

"Of course," replied Konan like a shot, "But *that* seriously falls under the duty of confidentiality, so I can't give you any details. You can easily find out by asking Youko-chan directly, though. At any rate, it's really no big deal. After all, there's nothing to doubt her for, apart from it being unusual to lose both parents in such a short time."

I wasn't taking him at his word, but I was quite sure that the police appeared to have no definite evidence.

"I'm baffled. I hear our police are respected worldwide, but was that a misperception on my part? Neither the eyes of the public nor the mass media will forgive treating an innocent high school girl as a suspect, no matter how humbly you apologize."

It made sense to me now, sure, but I was far from reversing my own conclusion. The reason given was much too weak to treat Tsukimori as a criminal.

"Now, don't pick on me like that! It's true that the police are civil servants, so the pressure on us has been really harsh recently, as you say. We can't make a big deal out of it without irrefutable proof."

He raised his shoulders in an exaggerated shrug, like an American.

"Now, why don't you tell me what you *really* want from me?"

"Oh? Have you noticed? Not bad, Nonomiya-kun!"

He whistled skillfully without using his fingers.

I, too, hadn't known him very long, but I was well aware of his slyness. I was convinced that he hadn't told me everything yet.

Suddenly, Konan leaned forward, "That's where you come into play! I want you to cooperate with me."

I sneered daringly.

By thinking over our conversation in my head, I finally started to grasp his intention.

"...if someone unrelated to the police observed Tsukimori, it would cause no trouble. Plus, the more intimate that observer is with her, the better. That's why you chose me, right?"

"Seems we speak the same language," said Konan contentedly and tilted his coffee cup. "Besides, you like this kind of work, don't you?"

"I want to be spared from trouble," I said and added, "And please don't arbitrarily decide what I like!" But, truth be told, I actually was interested.

"No use shamming," he laughed confidently.

He had quickly recognized what kind of person I was. Because I had shown interest in the situation of the investigation? Because I had shown interest in him as a detective? Either way, while I hadn't hidden it deliberately, I still had to respect his perspicacity.

"That's pretty much the reason why I singled *you* out."

"What, specifically, would you have me do?"

I maintained a passive stance. I wanted to wait and see what move he would make next.

"No need to be so wary, really! Basically, I just want you to answer my questions about Youko-chan. I won't exploit you by sending you around or by making you do demanding stuff. Ah, please eat before the steak gets cold. Feel free to order a dessert afterwards."

Konan grinned. He clearly intended to exploit me.

Naturally I had no appetite, but I still put my knife into the steak, which was bound to be cold by now.

"—To tell the truth, it's not by the consensus of the police that I'm here. You could even call it a personal request from me. To be frank, I'm the only one at the station who bears Youko-chan in mind," he suddenly started talking after watching me eat for a while, "Well, it's not surprising, because that suicide kind of lacks peculiarity. If you just assume her motive was grief over losing her husband, it makes sense. We even have several statements that confirm that she was depressed since his death," Konan

put on a self-ironic smile. "But what has to be noted is that her suicide note was written on the computer and not by hand. So it's physically possible that it was typed in by someone else who wanted to make the incident out to be suicide. But that's not enough to dig out the case. Keep in mind that many suicide victims don't leave behind a note at all. For another thing, the only fact that makes Youko-chan doubtful is that she's her daughter. It's not like her behavior raised any doubts."

I stopped my fork and knife and looked Konan straight into the eye, "Then I fail to understand why you doubt Tsukimori all the more. I don't want to help you as long as you can't give me a plausible explanation."

Since learning about the murder recipe I had been observing Tsukimori day in, day out. So what should he, who had only just met Tsukimori, know that I didn't know? What trait of Tsukimori's should he know, which I, the holder of the murder recipe, didn't know?

Of course, if he really knew a side of hers I didn't know, my stance would change as well.

—Because that would be something I definitely needed to know.

With a neutral expression, Konan replied, "Call it a detective's intuition."

"Hah?"

I didn't believe my ears. Noticing my bafflement, he hurriedly added, "Ah, was I too blunt? No, but you see, it's not easy to explain it with words! Perhaps you could say, something feels 'wrong' to me?"

"A gut feeling, huh...", I murmured, unconvinced, but his following words caught me entirely by surprise.

"I mean, Youko-chan's *perfect*, isn't she?"

My heart beat accelerated rapidly.

He had the same impression as I had had many times before.

"I've experienced this sort of incident quite a few times so far, due to my job and all, and let me tell you: to the people concerned it's a real shock to lose their parents if they're about your age. It's a sudden change of their life! Seriously, that's just... cruel. Be it an accident or an incident, I still haven't found out how I should deal with those kids. How hard must it be if they lose both their parents at the same time?" he suddenly put on a severe expression, "Now, how about her? To me, Youko-chan doesn't look at all like a desolate seventeen-year-old who has suffered such a loss. In our conversations she comes across just too faultless! Her perfectness isn't something that can be explained just by saying she had a good grip on herself or that she was behaving mature. Don't you agree?"

—She's so perfect being around her would be suffocating.

Come to think of it, that was my initial impression of her.

"I even happened to think that she would be fine without her parents. That we had nothing to worry about."

Thirsty from talking long in one go, Konan did not take his cup of coffee but the glass of water right next to it and emptied it.

"Sorry for giving you such a baseless reason. But I'm actually quite serious. In our field, it's not at all rare that a slight gut feeling can lead to the truth of an incident."

Looking at Konan, who was keeping up an expression full of confidence—

"Complicated thoughts about these things are no good. Believe it or not, it's simple more often than not. Essentially, unusual things happen around someone who is unusual. Isn't it easy?"

—I thought that the expression "a detective's intuition" might have been quite appropriate.

Apparently, my silence made Konan think I was ill-tempered.

"Did I offend you? Well, naturally I did. After all, I'm asking you to help me confirm my doubts even though you are very intimate with Youko-chan. Now that I think of it, isn't this quite a nasty request?" he said and laughed, "Don't become like me!"

It's not like I was offended. I was merely deep in thought. I was overwhelmed by a great number of thoughts that came up in my head.

—Most likely, he doesn't know about the murder recipe.

That was the only thing I was sure of at the moment. At the same time it was also the most important one.

When I collected myself, I found Konan looking seriously at me.

"Why don't you think of it the other way round? Just think you're helping me to prove that she's innocent. You don't want me to doubt Youko-chan, right?"

It slipped out of my mouth:

"I sure don't want that."

Those words came from the bottom of my heart. It had been *me* who had doubted Youko Tsukimori up to now. The fact that some cop suddenly appeared and doubted her was repulsive; as if someone was nitpicking about how I played my game.

Apparently, Konan took my answer as affirmation. "Right!" he nodded happily, "Waitress! I'll have another cup of coffee! And add a glass of water to that!"

He drunk up the rest of his nearly empty coffee.

Then I talked to Konan for a whole hour, telling him details about Tsukimori.

I taught him everything I knew, that time also including things like her popularity and competence at work and school. Well, I *did* keep quiet about things like the confession at the library, but otherwise, for example why she started to work at Victoria or what happened on that night when her mother went missing, I told him everything as detailed as possible.

I had arrived at the conclusion that I couldn't hide anything from that man. Hence, I considered it more fruitful to earn his trust by not holding back any information.

At the end, Konan asked me to contact him if I found out anything and told me that he would also contact me if he wanted me to help him with something, then we parted ways.

Of course I kept quiet about the murder recipe, although it's not like I hadn't considered telling him.

I was convinced enough of his capability as a detective that I didn't allow myself to be deceived by his gigolo-like appearance and behavior. If I gave him that vital spark, the murder recipe, he would no doubt be able to reach a "deep layer" of this incident which I could never reach on my own.

In all objectivity, there would have been no more effective way to fulfill my desire of learning "everything about Youko Tsukimori" than to tell Konan about the murder recipe. However, I couldn't bring myself to do that.

Because the murder recipe was mine.

There was one certain thing I noticed. It was the only and, at the same time, a most important discovery.

Indeed — the murder recipe had not at all lost its lustre after all.

[Hesitation]

To my blank amazement, it was not pity that lay in the gazes of most students, but jealousy of their peers.

As soon as Youko Tsukimori appeared at school after her long absence, everyone strove to be around her. In no time at all, a wall akin to a fortress loomed before her.

"Are you okay, Youko-san? Aren't you tired? Don't hesitate to tell me if there's anything I can help you with, okay?"

"Thank you, Chizuru. I feel much better now that I have seen your lovely face. I really should have brought myself to come to school sooner," she put on a brilliant smile and stroked Usami's cheek softly, while Usami was worriedly looking up at her. Tsukimori then took a look at the surrounding people. "My sincere thanks to everyone else as well. I can't express how happy I am... that so many of you have worried about me. I am really lucky to have classmates like you!"

She closed her eyes softly without breaking her smile as she put her hands on her well-rounded bosom.

Tempted by the deep emotion she was showing, they all put on meek expressions and nodded all together.

I almost had to snort upon seeing that Kamogawa and his guys were among them, too, with earnest faces that couldn't have suited them less.

Originally my classmates probably wanted to be the ones that comforted a disheartened Tsukimori, but in fact it turned out the opposite. If someone had taken a photograph of that scene and told me it was Tsukimori comforting her disheartened classmates, I would have believed it.

In other words, Youko Tsukimori could do perfectly without our worthless pity.

Only when she was among masses of people like now, her true value surfaced.

Though everyone wore the same uniform and was the same age, only she was special and stood out from the others, shining almost like the moon in the darkest night:

magnificently and full of elegance.

As there was no way to get through the impregnable fortress that was protecting her, I was degraded to a mere "Villager A" who beheld the captivating princess from afar.

From time to time, however, our eyes met.

I can't deny that I found myself not incapable of interpreting her demanding gaze as an appeal to rescue her. But for one thing I would have looked stupid if I was wrong, and for another thing it was unreasonable to voluntarily take such a calorie-consuming action for someone like me who does not care two figs about knightliness. Thus, I slipped out of the uncomfortable classroom and brilliantly fulfilled my role as Villager A by silently watching the clouds through the corridor window until homeroom began.

Even during breaks the situation didn't change.

It didn't take me long to realize that I wouldn't be able to properly talk to her at school for a while, thus I chose to spend my breaks in the quiet corridor, away from the noise.

As a reaction to my quick resignation, clever Tsukimori started to write messages on a quartered report sheet and passed them to me during the breaks because she couldn't talk to me directly.

To prevent the others from noticing, she gave them to me while passing me by without looking at me. She either handed the letters to me or just put them into my pocket.

By the time school was over, five of them had come into my possession.

I laid them out in the order I had received them, starting with the one I had gotten in the first break.

«Why didn't you help me?»

«You know my feelings, don't you?»

«It's been so long since we could talk.»

«I think I will be in the library during lunch break.»

«I forgot how cold-hearted you are.»

She had surely realized that mailing me would have done the job. I sensed a kind of unyielding spirit and pride from the fact that she still chose to stick to those messages.

By the way, I had indulged myself in a midday nap during that lunch break. Because I would have to deal with her at work after school anyway.

Besides, there was still one scrap she had not given me yet, judging from the pattern she used. The "after-school"-message. I had in mind to react after reading that one.

As expected, she let a scrap of paper fall on my desk as she passed me by while cheerfully saying goodbye to her classmates.

A smile escaped my mouth when I read the hastily written message. It was at last a request I couldn't reject, so I quickly packed my bag and left the classroom.

«This day tired me. I don't want to walk. I'll have you take me to the café on your bicycle. In return I'll forgive your behavior today.»

As it seemed, it's not always easy to be in the spotlight. Just watching had annoyed me, so I figured her exhaustion had to be huge.

Since I was satisfied by having gotten her to show a sign of weakness, though only in letters, I was willing to answer the princess' wishes for once and give her a ride.

When I left the school building with such thoughts, my eyes found a tall man near the front gate.

He spotted me immediately and signaled me to come by waving me to him, while "hiding" in the shadow of the gate.

I would have preferred to just feign ignorance, but he wasn't someone that would allow me to ignore him. He would simply pursue me until he had me.

I took out my mobile phone, quickly typed in a message and sent it. I informed Tsukimori that I could not accompany her to the café.

I didn't want to involve her in "that matter". Not out of some sparkling heroism to protect her, but because I considered it a private affair.

A reply returned a few seconds later.

«I don't care about you anymore!»

What speed, considering the number of letters! I could well imagine her pressing the buttons of her phone with a furious wrath at an imperceptible speed.

Even though I felt a little upset as I looked up at the clear blue sky, I had to acknowledge it was my own fault and gave up. After all, it was *I* who had evaded her that entire day.

It's not like there was a special reason.

I simply hadn't wanted to become one among many.

"Ya! Let's get into my car instead of standing here."

Konan was in a good humor as always.

"What do you want from me this time?"

Therefore I responded purposefully in ill-humor.

"Do I have to tell you?"

"Yes. I have to go to work afterward, so I find myself constrained to refuse if it's useless talk."

"Mh... well, I can surely tell you right now, but it's some *really* nasty stuff that shouldn't be said at the gate of a school. Still wanna know?" he stressed with a heavily wrinkled brow, giving me the pleasure of bathing in the shocked glances of the surrounding students.

"...Let's just go. Come on."

"Thank you for your ready approval! It's a pleasure to work with you, Nonomiya-kun!"

I saw that staying here would only give birth to bad rumors, so I reluctantly followed him out of the gate.

Konan's car, parked near the school in a side alley, was a bright red sports car that quite suited his style.

"Nice car, huh? Doesn't it have a nice ring to it that I *deliberately* chose an Audi instead of a Porsche, a Ferrari or an Alfa Romeo? Feel free to think to yourself that an Audi was the limit of my salary as a civil servant, but you mustn't say it."

"Is it okay for a police detective to park on the street?"

I didn't recognize the make of his car, but I very easily recognized the no parking sign right next to the sports car.

"It's okay *because* I am a police detective. If I hypothetically get a fine for illegal parking, I can just make good use of my position and cover up the misdemeanor."

"What a corrupt world."

"I wonder who made it like this?"

"Deep inside you should know."

"Oh, how philosophic. Too deep for me, so hop in already."

The unaffected expression he showed as he played dumb suited him perfectly. Since I had to admit that, I had no choice but to give in and take a seat.

"—A couple of days ago you explained to me what happened on the day when Youko-chan's mother went missing, remember? At that restaurant."

"Yes."

The second I sat down on the passenger seat, Konan began talking in an earnest voice.

The authority he emitted made it seem as though the air of the car had been compressed in a split second, sending the previously peaceful mood away far away.

"Actually, I've hashed and rehashed it in my mind, but there are some points that just won't make sense to me."

Konan brought down the window and lighted a cigarette from his breast pocket.

"Take the phone call from her mother's workplace. If you ask me, that timing was *too* good. Don't you think Youko-chan actually made sure that she would get that call when she was together with you?" he blew a stream of smoke out of the window, "Don't you think it's strange that the phone rang precisely the moment she clung to you?"

The scene of that rainy night's crossroads—of the colorful umbrellas—rose into my mind.

"How would she make them call her at a good timing?"

It goes without saying that the timing had caught my attention. However, I did not know how to get someone to make such a convenient call.

"She could have left behind her number in their call history right before hugging you, for an example."

It was an emergency case.

"Considering how pressing the thing was, they may have called her several times already while you were working?"

For the cooking school, one of their teachers was missing without notice and was completely unavailable at that. It's perfectly thinkable that they would have promptly called back any number in their unaccepted call history, even if it was an unknown one.

"However, nobody knew whether she had gotten a call or not. You couldn't find out just by being at the same place," Konan's mouth broke into a grin, "Unless you got in close contact by, say, hugging each other."

I recalled what I had felt that night; the vibration reaching me via her breasts that had been pressed against my chest.

"...indeed, her mobile phone was set to... silent mode."

"That's exactly what I mean. Well, you also mustn't forget that we're dealing with Youko-chan. It's also possible that there was no call in the first place. In other words, she pretended. She acted."

"Acted?"

"Have you ever heard of the alarm function?"

"Of course! Do you think I'm a—" I began, but couldn't continue because I realized at once what he was getting at.

Konan went on, "Phones don't only vibrate for incoming calls. The alarm functions lately have become really handy; they keep on vibrating until you execute the predefined operation."

"Would she really do that?" I asked myself silently with several question marks popping up over my head. However, taking only the point of whether it's possible or not into consideration, the answer was clear.

"You can't be sure if it's her, can you?"

I couldn't deny it. I was positive that she could have done it.

"Well, we don't know if she acted or if there really was a call. It's just that your explanation leaves those possibilities open. But either way, it's not relevant. Feel free to forget about it. Her real intention lies somewhere else, after all."

"Her real intention...?"

Konan kept silent, waiting for my next words; probably because he had noticed that I was pondering.

Her primary objective that night, which she was even willing to feign a call for, was —

"—to lure me to her home?"

He snapped his fingers, "Bingo! It makes sense if her goal was to get you to her home. No one would leave someone whose mother has just gone missing. Even someone as dry as you wouldn't. Well, and you *did* go to her home in the end."

I reconsidered that night with the events Konan pointed out in mind.

—It was as though a crumbled block was reconstructed at a terrific speed. And the newly built block had a completely different shape.

While crushing his cigarette in the ashtray, he continued, "I think you got it. She

assigned the task of discovering the suicide note to you."

A cold shiver ran down my back.

If he was right about that, everything that had happened that night had been based on a scenario written by Youko Tsukimori.

"There's another doubtful aspect apart from that. Recall what happened right when you arrived at her home. If I'm not mistaken the first thing she did was getting you a towel to wipe your wet body," he raised his head and looked at me with a razor-sharp gaze, "That's not normal, is it? The first action one would normally take isn't 'getting a towel' but 'finding that mother'!"

Having come to the conclusion that Youko Tsukimori had not killed anyone, I was supposed to deny his opinion, regardless of what it consisted of.

"Indeed, you do have a point. It also stands true, however, that I could clearly sense that nobody was in the house the moment I stepped into the building. I'd say that Tsukimori must have been able to perceive the situation much more clearly than I, the outsider, who'd only come for the second time."

Nevertheless, I was impressed by everything he pointed out.

"You mean that Youko-chan was able to conclude that her mother wasn't there even without searching the house?"

"Yes," I nodded.

"I don't think so," Konan flashed a masterful grin, "But I'm an adult, experienced in the ways of the world and all, you know, so I just can't think as straightly as you do."

Seeing how he was able to conclude so much just with the little information he had, he deserved his title as a detective. He really *was* an extremely capable person. He made me understand that once more.

I even found myself impatient for more—

"The thing may be that her mother was already dead when you went there, and she knew it. Thus, she wasn't eager to search for her. It's possible to interpret her unnatural behavior in such a way, don't you agree?"

"...So?"

My forced voice was a little hoarse.

"What are you getting at?"

Because I knew exactly what Konan was going to answer.

The instant I averted my eyes from him—his long arm whooshed past my head and his hand landed hard on the the passenger side window.

"Was it over your head? Then I'll be frank with you..."

His sharp features were directly before me as he leaned forward. The stench of smoke assaulted my nose.

"...that girl, Youko Tsukimori, has killed her mother!"

After declaring that, his gaze was drawn towards the front window.

Following him, I also directed my eyes there. Ahead of the straight side alley was the main street, bathed in madder red. One could see students on their way home passing by like fishes swimming.

There was one person that had gotten separated from the bulk, standing still at the opening of the alley.

The silhouette was slender and was long-haired. Due to the backlight the sunset produced, I couldn't make out her face. What I clearly did recognize, however, was that the high school girl over there was gazing at us.

She wasn't approaching us, nor was she walking away; just staring in our direction. That shadow had a terrifically strong presence to it despite just standing there without even interacting with us.

I delved deep into the seat and quickly urged, "...please get us out of here right now."

"Are you sure?" Konan asked with his gaze still on the front window.

"Yes," I answered, whereupon he replied with a stressed "Hmmm?"

The next moment, he switched once to neutral before quickly shifting gears and backing out of the narrow side alley at a breakneck speed. In no time we arrived at the street opposite the female student.

During that I could do nothing but tightly clench my fist.

At first Konan said nothing, but when we came upon a red traffic light, he returned to the topic as if he had been waiting for it.

"I'm sure I don't have to explain to you that she fulfills all necessary prerequisites to fake her mother's suicide note, right?"

I nodded. That was my limit. I didn't know what would come out if I opened my mouth.

"She's a bright girl. She knew that authenticity would rise dramatically if the note was discovered by a third party rather than herself. And she chose you for that part. Well, her plan worked out splendidly since you did find it for her."

I ground my teeth.

"I also think that as a family member she should have had no trouble killing her mother. I mean, let's not even start listing the ways she could have used to take her out! What remained was to go to that forlorn park on the high ground and push her down the cliff."

I was clenching my fist so hard it hurt.

"Child's play for her, right?"

Don't talk big like that! You don't know her as well as I do!—I found myself fighting with the urge to shout out all this.

What compelled me that moment was not impatience anymore but raw anger. Hearing someone else talk about her like that irritated me as if having my garden trampled down by strangers.

Konan pulled the car onto the sidewalk and smiled, "We're here."

I peeked out and found that he had parked along the main street, near the café.

I gave him a nod, "Thank you."

The next moment he put on his usual frivolous smile and shrugged like an American.

"Sorry for startling you. But once in a while I have to show you that I'm still a policeman, a detective, you know," he grinned, but his eyes weren't at all smiling, "And I don't want to cause the misunderstanding that you can hide things from me forever." He pulled me closer by my shoulder, "...I would be very thankful if you could soon recall some interesting info, since that would save me some messy work..."

His emphatic whisper sent a cold shiver down my spine. I guessed that being threatened with a knife pressed against one's neck had to be a similar experience.

I averted my gaze without replying and discovered the reflection of a person in the window.

There was a grim high school boy who didn't move a muscle with the exception of the blinking of his eyes. I noticed that the hand of that student was holding onto his left breast.

I felt a familiar touch with my fingers.

—The murder recipe.

I had strained my hand without noticing it.

It was the one thing I had to protect no matter what.

Because the murder recipe embodied the only point where I had the upper hand over Konan and was my last trump card against Youko Tsukimori.

Mopping the dim café after closing time. Suddenly, a shadow obstructed the course of my mop. I looked up and found the owner of the shadow standing with legs spread and arms crossed.

"Did you have an argument or something?" asked Mirai-san, looking down at me with a deeply wrinkled brow.

"Argument? Who? With whom?"

I wasn't playing dumb. I honestly didn't know.

"Are you dumb? You and Youko of course, who else?"

"I really don't think I'm dumb... but anyway, what gives you that idea?"

"It's pretty damn obvious if anyone looked at you two! You haven't talked at all lately, have you?"

While leaning onto the mop, I thought about it.

"...we haven't?"

I remembered next to nothing of today's work.

"Doesn't surprise me. It was obvious that you were miles away."

Now that she mentioned it, I had to admit that in my thoughts I had been "miles away" with Konan indeed. I had been pondering over a way to surpass that man non-stop during work.

The more I thought about it, the more I came to think that I had no chance of beating him.

"Anyway, leaving that aside since it's nothing new in your case—"

"Objection!"

"Overruled!"

She had no sympathy.

"Let me carry on; this time Youko's acting strange as well. It looks like she's actively avoiding you to me," she thrust out her chin and drew herself up, "So, what have you done to her? Come on, try to explain yourself. At least I'll hear you out."

As usual, she was so stubborn with her opinion that it was refreshing.

"Are you unable to think that I might be the victim?"

"Yeah. I'm on Youko's side whatever happens."

"What an unreasonable world!"

"Ohh, you only noticed just now?" she answered my lamenting words haughtily, "The world's unreasonable and unjust wherever you go; otherwise social stratification would not exist in the first place. So why should I bother playing a saint if the world's very setup is already shit? I live by my own rules."

If you ever tried giving the word "self-centered" a form, you would definitely get this woman in front of you.

"My way of life is simple, isn't it?"

Well, it *was* simple indeed.

Her rule was just one: getting her will whatever others say. Nothing more.

But I couldn't imagine just how hard it had to be to pull that "nothing more" through. It's not something anyone can do. Not everyone is as strong as she is.

But she carried on playing her guitar without letting the noise of the world interrupt her concert.

There are bound to be some that brand people like her as trouble-makers, as egoists, or even hate them. I agreed insofar that it was a highly justified view.

"...indeed. So simple I'm almost jealous."

To my chagrin, however, I found myself understanding her very well.

I couldn't help but be amused by such a reckless woman who would hold a mike with one hand and show the masses the middle finger with the other. As one of her fans I thought, "One or two like her wouldn't do any harm to the world."

"Okay, you oughta apologize now."

"To you?" I played dumb. Mirai-san smiled, amazed.

"Idiot. No use apologizing to me, is there. You should apologize to the chit-sorting 'princess' who's sneaking peeks at us from over there!" said the "queen" in a loud voice.

I turned around and discovered Tsukimori standing at the register where no one had been at the start of our conversation. Our eyes met.

"It hath come to my ear that Your Highness wisheth for an apology. Is it true?" I asked in a quite sardonic tone, upon which Tsukimori dropped her gaze immediately to her hands.



"Why should I need an apology? We have *not at all* had an argument with each other, have we?" she answered while sorting one chit after the other.

"Her Highness begs to differ, I fear?"

"Just look, does that look to you like she's not angry at you? She couldn't make it more obvious! Now, come on, I'm bothering to act as a go-between for you, so take action and say you're sorry already."

"Don't worry, Mirai-san. I am not angry *in the least*. But even *if* we were in the middle of a quarrel and *if* I wished for an apology from Nonomiya-kun, there would be no point if he does not feel any guilt. I would still prefer no apology at all over getting an idle one that is not meant by heart," said Tsukimori in one breath.

"Don't worry'? 'Not angry in the least'?" I was irritated by Tsukimori's indirect and ironic allusions, "If she wants to say something, she should make herself clear, don't you agree, Mirai-san?"

"Now, look at that, Mirai-san. You can't call it a quarrel if Nonomiya-kun is not even aware of what he has done."

"I won't apologize, Mirai-san! She's just getting worked up all on her own."

"Mirai-san, let's not bother with that blockhead anymore."

Suddenly, Mirai-san tousled her fair hair with both hands and...

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!!!"

...shouted from the top of her lungs.

"Hell! Just shut up! You're getting on my nerves!"

The manager and Saruwatari-san cautiously peeked out of the staffroom to check what was going on.

"This! Really! Is! A pain!"

Mirai-san wound her arm around my head and took me into a neck-hold. The soft feeling against my cheek made me realize that there was something womanly about her after all.

She ignored my complaints and proceeded rapidly towards the register while yelling, "Come here!"

Upon arriving there, she stretched out her free arm, as could be expected, and took Tsukimori by the neck in the same manner.

We two, constrained at Mirai-san's side, were forced to face each other from close up whether we wanted or not.

I did not want to see Tsukimori's face in the least, but unfortunately Mirai-san's modest breasts were quite the opposite of her personality and thus obviously insufficient for blocking the view for me.

I may add that she will never hear that from my mouth. Ever.

"You know, I'm really not that patient! I can't stand such a pain anymore! Forget about the remaining work and just *get out*!"

She yelled down at us, saying things about her temper everybody already knew.

"Nonomiya! You apologize to Youko! And Youko, you forgive him when he does!" she said while scowling at us in turn, "I don't care about the reason behind this quarrel, but make sure you make up with each other on the way to the station! Then you come to work tomorrow as usual! Got it? That's an order!"

Before I knew it, Tsukimori and I were exchanging glances, and a moment later sighing as if on cue.

"Hey, what about your reply!?"

Faced with the overwhelming commands that rained down on us, we exchanged glances once more and had no choice but to nod reluctantly, "...understood."

Solely lit by white street lights, we walked along a narrow alley towards the station. We were silent.

Upon entering the way along the main street, our field of vision was filled with gorgeous neon light. The number of people increased in proportion to the illumination, and so did the noise. The headlights of the cars passing us by made us flare up in yellow. Far away a siren was resounding, whereas in the proximity a dog was raising a forceful bark to fight it back. And we were silent.

Tsukimori was the first to give in to the oppressive air.

She stopped abruptly.

"You have been a little strange lately," she whispered, getting straight to the point, "Is there something bothering you?"

"Do I look that way?" I asked back.

She tilted her neat chin a bit and asked further, "Perhaps it is related to Konan-san?"

I did not remember having spoken about Konan in her presence—

"I have heard he visited the café when I was absent."

—but I figured that there were some things she already knew.

"According to Mirai-san, you two get on well together, just like a couple."

What on earth had Mirai-san told her about us? Not that I wanted to know.

"That's none of your business," I spat out bluntly and averted my gaze from her.

I didn't want to talk about Konan with her.

"But it is!"

I insisted on settling the matter with Konan without her interference.

"I say it's not."

Of course I was aware that she had no way of knowing that I didn't want to drag her in.

"I can't just ignore it!" her eyes suddenly turned serious, "There is nothing about you that's not important to me."

In Tsukimori's wide opened and clear eyes I was reflected with an awfully disinterested face.

Stop it! Don't look at me with such eyes!

While I was not at all in the position to complain to her for insistently probing into a subject I shunned—I was the one of us who wanted to hide his feelings, after all—I gave in to my displeasure and raised my pace.

"I hate insistent women!"

It might have still been forgivable if I had been just acting, but unfortunately I had been simply unable to hide my irritation.

As a matter of fact, I had been quite taxed recently. I was frustrated because I wasn't making progress with Konan. I was pressured because I was unable to find a way to break that deadlock. I was in constant unrest that he might find out about the murder recipe.

And most of all, I felt inferior to her.

Suddenly, Tsukimori pulled my arm from behind, "Come here." She drew me to an old bench near a bus stop and made me sit down. Then she trotted off towards a vending machine a couple of meters away and quickly came back with two cans in her hands.

She put on a smile, "You like 'this', don't you?"

She thrust a cold and wet orange can out to me. I was so taken aback that I completely forgot about my irritation.

...Youko Tsukimori really was not to be underestimated. Apparently she had been all ears to our talk in the classroom.

"If we get into a quarrel here again even though Mirai-san told us to make up, I won't be able to face her tomorrow."

I snatched the juice away from her, opened the lid and took a long gulp of the cool orange-colored liquid.

"We can consider ourselves lucky to have someone that worries so much about us. Don't you agree?"

The sour but refreshing taste of the orange juice soothed my boisterous feelings effectively.

"...It's as you say. I'm sorry."

Tsukimori sat down next to me. "No, please forgive *me*." Her hair-ends swayed. "I tried being sulky for once," she giggled with her gaze still dropped, "Because you have been giving me the cold shoulder lately."

She brought her face to mine with reproachful eyes.

"Please come to my place again sometime. I promise I won't do anything you don't like anymore, okay?" she said jokingly and laughed, but I couldn't help finding a trace of loneliness in her face. I recalled that she was all alone now.

Tsukimori's house was large; and had to feel even larger without any cohabitants. Various worries crossed my mind.

"...but you've been quite occupied yourself, too, recently."

As a matter of fact, I had gotten my plate much too full with Konan alone to care about Tsukimori, but I felt a little guilty upon seeing her lonely like that.

"Oh yes, because a certain someone did not only refrain from helping me but also ignored me completely, I had no time for recreation at school."

"Well, you have my sympathies."

"I'm sure you aren't joking but really mean it like that..." Tsukimori shrugged her shoulders exaggeratedly along with a small sigh.

Sure enough, I had decided to give priority to the affair with Konan rather than Tsukimori's situation.

"At any rate, I'll try to act normal at the café, so please tell Mirai-san something positive, too," I ended our conversation and stood up.

"—Konan-san and you are like brothers with an age gap," Tsukimori murmured, "Perhaps it was that, supported by the fact that you're two men, that made me feel unhappy and left out."

I sat down again on the bench and peeked at her seemingly brooding face from the side.

"...Konan-san and I are like brothers, you say? Haven't you also compared Mirai-san and me in a similar way?"

"Yes, I have. Now that you say it, all three of you resemble each other. Of course I don't mean your looks by that, you understand?"

"Care to elaborate?"

I was very interested in how I looked in her eyes.

"Let me think... I don't know if it's the right expression to use, but you three somehow resemble each other in your 'way of life'."

"...our way of life, huh."

"I'm sorry that I can't put it clearly."

"No, I think I get what you mean."

'Way of life' was a rather wide term, but if interpreted as something like 'our values', then I had to admit that theirs and mine weren't so different. I was sympathizing with them in many regards.

Tsukimori's opinion was most interesting, which is why I felt inclined to ask more. Especially about Konan.

"Tell me, what do you think about Konan? He's quite a strange guy, don't you agree?"

Tsukimori rested her chin on her hand and meaningfully sighed, "He sure is!"

"You don't look pleased," I stated.

"I don't really like him. I don't feel comfortable when he's around me because I have to be cautious of his attempts to read my character all the time. So it's really tiring to be together with him for too long. I wonder if all detectives are like him?"

She pulled her slender shoulders in as if she were attacked by a cold shiver.

I haven't seen her like this very often. If it's Konan, however, anyone would show a similar reaction. That man was not normal.

"In comparison I would want to be by your side for hours and hours. I wonder why that is?"

She cocked her head and peeked into my face like a little devil.

"Don't ask me," I averted my eyes after deigning her a look, "I don't know about other detectives, but I'm pretty sure he belongs to a very peculiar category. He constantly leads me by the nose. I'm no match for him."

Right. I was at my wit's end. Maybe he had been too strong an opponent for me from the beginning.

"But as a man who resembles him, you should understand Konan-san much better than I do," she said, "Right?" Tsukimori formed her mouth into a crescent moon smile.

My heart skipped a beat.

"Don't you think that he cares more than necessary about you and not me because he likes you? It's normal to feel special about people that seem to understand you," she added.

My heart reacted fiercely to each of her words.

"That's a lie. I have no idea what he thinks."

"Indeed. From time to time I have no idea what you think, either, Nonomiya-kun," she giggled, shaking her hair.

My mind was blurry—the trail felt so near and still I couldn't see it.

"What are you getting at? I fail to comprehend what you want to tell me."

But I was confident that the trail was somewhere ahead.

"Mhh, as I said, you two resemble each other!"

Tsukimori put on a mischievous smile and purred pretentiously.

"No, I've heard that already."

When I gave her an urging look, she shrugged lightly in an uncomfortable manner and finally opened her mouth.

My mind cleared up the very moment her words reached my ears.

"If you want to know what he thinks, just think about what you would do in his place!"

Because we resembled each other. Our trains of thought should resemble as well — She added with a smile.

Without waiting for her to finish speaking, I started thinking.

I matched Konan's actions so far with my own thoughts. What would I do? What would I want to do? Ideas started flooding into my head without end.

"...sorry. There's something I have to do," I told her quickly, pressed 120 Yen into her hand and ran off home. I rushed through the night town without caring about her yell that caught up with me.

I just wanted to be alone. I wanted to be alone and collect my overflowing thoughts.

I hadn't found a clear answer to how I could settle that affair with Konan — I was going to think about that now — but I was on the right trail.

This matter doesn't necessarily have to end with a clear result. And it's not important what the truth behind the incident is. Those were the two things I was sure of.

Why? — Because I thought so.

[Bye-Bye]

Every now and then a train crossed the railway bridge. Each time that happened, the white railing I was sitting on started vibrating and an ear-shattering noise filled the tunnel.

I was under a railway overpass at the edge of a residential area close to my school, which I had chosen because there would be no passers-by even during the day, and was waiting for the time.

I didn't want to be interrupted by anyone.

Under the railway, where no sun reached, even the concrete's gray looked darker and more inorganic than usual. I shuddered even though it was still afternoon.

Probably due to the sound insulation of the concrete, the sounds of the vicinity seemed extremely far. When I silently held my breath, I was under the impression that I was in an isolated institution far away in no-man's-land.

That might be the reason why I didn't notice him until he was nearby.

On the boundary separating light and darkness, a tall man with the appearance of a gigolo grinned daringly, a cigarette dangling from his mouth.

"Ya! Quite unexpected to have you call me out. What happened?"

His voice resounded from the concrete all around us.

"Oh, have you by any chance *recalled* some good piece of information concerning Youko-chan?"

He flicked the cigarette away, which then traversed a parabola before hitting the asphalt.

"But whew," he began while cracking his neck, "you sure have chosen quite a desolate place. Are you out for a duel with me today or what?" He crushed the cigarette with his caramel-brown shoes.

"Weak as I am, I would never feel inclined to a duel," I shook my head, "But I *do* want to settle things with you."

I restfully stood up and fixedly stared at the man a few meters from me.

"Let's put an end to it," I smiled.

"That's my line!" He closed one eye and grinned broadly, "Since you are the host, I'll let you have your say first."

Konan leaned on the wall and crossed his arms.

"I would like to start not with a statement but with a question."

"Oh, sure, sure. As many as you want, no need to be shy with me," he nodded easygoingly.

"Why did you become a detective?"

The next moment, he narrowed his eyes full of interest while stroking his chin.

"I don't want to be rude, but you aren't the type that acts out of a sense of justice."

"That sure *is* rude, whoa. Actually, I've taken to answering such questions with 'It's to save the day!' while flashing a cool smile."

Upon seeing my dumbfounded face, he laughed dryly.

"Being a detective is what I live for!" he suddenly made a serious face, "I chose a job where it's work and work throughout the year, all day long, and where I may lose my life due to a slight mistake. Because I'm still a civil servant, people insult me, calling me a tax parasite despite my poor salary. So why did I sign up for such a thankless job? You know, it's to see all kinds of people and their relationships in all kinds of situations, whether they're joyous or grieving!"

Konan stared into the air with an odd light in his eyes, originating from ecstasy.

"It's such a tremulous excitement when their masks crumble! It feels as if I were able to sneak a peek at the true nature of us humans. Bare emotions tell the truth much more eloquently than any justification."

When he finished, I couldn't suppress a sneer anymore.

"Oh that's cruel, Nonomiya-kun. Now that I've answered seriously for once because you looked so stern! I bet you're thinking of me as some psycho now, aren't you?"

I immediately answered his scowl by shaking my head.

"By no means. Rather I was relieved to hear so much nonsense. It suits you, you know?"

"Oho, now that's an unconventional evaluation."

"I guess. After all, I am, too, a good-for-nothing like you."

"I know," this time he sneered, "Since the moment I've first seen you."

The second I saw his grin, I was convinced: as Tsukimori had assessed, we really were similar.

"So, anything else you want to tell me?" he crossed his arms.

"There's nothing I would need to tell you!"

"Oh? You acknowledge it just like that? What I've said until now about Youko-chan, I mean?"

Konan doubtfully raised an eyebrow.

"You're getting me wrong. I'm saying that my opinion hasn't changed in the first place."

"Despite all I told you?"

"Yes, despite all that."

"Oh you're a trip! You're joking, right? Didn't you agree quite a lot to my doubts?"

"Indeed, I did agree. Insofar that the case could also be viewed in such an interesting light. Thanks to you I could catch a glimpse of how professional detectives deduce things by drawing one logical conclusion upon another. But that's all. My confidence in Tsukimori won't be swayed just by your assumptions."

When I smiled, he glared at me for just a split-second.

"Those are all just your assumptions. Frankly speaking, they're just baseless products of your over-creative fantasy."

Konan stared at me expressionlessly.

"Didn't you say yourself that the rest of the police are treating this case as an accident? In other words, you are suspecting her on a personal basis, right? I don't know how excellent a detective you are or how high-ranked you are within the police, but that's what we call a 'grandstand play', you know?"

Since he did not react, I proceeded even further.

"As you have told me earlier, too, even in a small town like ours there are incidents every day, so is it not rather suboptimal for an 'official' to bother with Tsukimori and me? If you still insist on associating with us, you'll deserve the labeling as a tax parasite."

Of course I had a reason for getting that offensive.

"It's not in the interest of either of us to waste any more time on this. If you recalled what your original job is, I could carefreely return to my peaceful student life as well."

I was confident that he had no irrefutable proof. In other words, he had still not arrived at the "murder recipe". And without it, it was not possible to reasonably entertain suspicions concerning Tsukimori.

"You've done your best. But there are other things you ought to do. So, let's put an end to this already."

There was one more thing that backed me up.

No one would blame him for backing out of this case. The police were considering it an accident; nothing hindered Konan from letting go. Konan had been free to proceed or withdraw from the very beginning. That's what I figured out.

"...you've got me there. You're completely right. Can't counter that," he pulled a new cigarette from the pocket of his jacket while smiling lopsidedly and put it into his mouth, "To tell the truth, the department chief and the station chief, well, let's just say the bigwigs, are bugging me all the time because they want me to do my work properly. My colleagues have already given up though, since it's nothing new for them,

heh!"

A small light flared up in the darkness. Konan had lit the cigarette with a lighter advertising some sleazy product.

"...Can you figure out why they still let me grandstand?"

He blew out a puff of smoke.

"It's because I'm capable!" he claimed confidently, "And do you know what makes me capable?"

He tapped on his forehead.

"My sharp intuition."

The next moment, his loud voice resounded through the entire tunnel.

"To get to the point! This *excellent* and sharp master detective *Konan* says this is fishy! You have to realize that a high school brat like you has no say in that whatsoever!"

His voice was reflected by the walls, by the ceiling, and rained down heavily on me. I felt as if I had been thrown into a bustling crowd.

"The point is! No matter what everyone else says, no matter if she herself denies it, *I* say she committed murder! So, Youko Tsukimori *has* killed her mother!" he finished, sucked in some smoke and blew it out contentedly.

"That's so unreasonable..." I managed to say, overwhelmed by his attitude.

"Unreasonable, indeed. But tell me, does the world work a different way? It doesn't matter what's right and what's not; the stronger one gets his way, right?" A puff of smoke was blown out of his bent mouth. "*Because* I believed in myself and my intuition, and *because* I stayed true to myself, I was able to get remarkable results, you know. And *because* of those results, nobody can object to what I'm doing."

He showed a "grin".

"So, I'm sorry Nonomiya-kun, but I'm gonna do it the way I want—"

But it was his peculiar kind of grin that looked dead serious.

"—Because that's how I've chosen to live my life."

When I took another glance at his "grin", I came to think that that way of smiling must be the embodiment of his nature.

Put crudely, Konan was a lunatic in a clown's disguise.

It's not easy to get by with an uncommon sense put to show. Therefore, he probably adapted to our society by acting frivolous most of the time.

That "grin" must have been a remnant of that madness which he could not conceal.

"Okay, it's my turn now," Konan crushed his cigarette with his heel.

He thrust his hands into the pockets of his tight slacks.

"Why are you so eager to defend Youko-chan?"

With a slow and firm pace, he drew closer on his long legs. Step by step, his leather shoes produced a reverberating creak that filled the passage.

"Don't you agree that it must be quite hard to believe so firmly in her without *a lot* of personal sympathy?"

I felt my stomach knot tighter and tighter at the sound of his steadily approaching footsteps.

"I'm not deliberately defending her, really! But it's simply absurd to expect me to believe that a classmate of mine is a killer. Isn't it normal that I can't, and don't want to, believe your doubts?"

"Yeah, completely normal," he admitted casually. That was, however, only a preface to what was to come. "But come on, in spite of everything I'm still a detective, if I may say so myself. It's not absurd in any way if you were a little more doubtful of her, right? I mean, hey, *the police* are suspecting her, so there might be something to it! I think it wouldn't do you any harm if you agreed a little more with me, you know, admitting that I have some points that make her suspicious. There's no need be so dismissive about it, is there? Well, that's the opinion of an experienced detective who has witnessed all kinds of incidents, anyway. Now, what do you say?" said the

experienced speaker Konan in a torrent of words with a peculiar intonation, giving the atmosphere around us his own touch.

"...I'm a cross-grained person, you know. I'm also a little contrary on top of that. Therefore, I don't want to simply nod to something that doesn't make perfect sense to me!"

As a natural consequence, my hands became sweaty and my voice became tense.

"I guess so. It's already an established fact within me that you're that type of person."

I registered that his smile seemed very content.

"But while you sure are a cross-grained lad, Nonomiya-kun, you are *not* an idiot, and you don't lack common sense either. So I can't understand why you are so understanding to her. With that personality of yours, shouldn't you rather search for Youko-chan's flaws the more perfect she is? At least the Nonomiya I know is someone who doesn't believe anything he hasn't seen with his own eyes."

It's agreeable if you are understood because the other party shows interest in yourself by doing so. If it's interest from a capable person like Konan on top of that, it can't be a bad feeling.

However, I couldn't help feeling uncomfortable, for his assessment was just too spot-on. That nasty feeling of having my whole body closely scrutinized, from tip to toe, gave me a chill.

Before I knew it, Konan was standing right before me.

"In short, you know, I've already concluded that your unconditional support of Youko-chan is due to special feelings towards her. And well, because you love her so much that whether she's guilty or not, you just don't care. You're like, 'I shall believe in her even when the rest of the world turns against us!', you see. Oh how great is the power of love. Whoa there, don't look at me like that! I'm not messing with you here. Actually, I quite like that way of thinking. No, make that 'I love it!'"

What a talkative man. It's not like I was dumbfounded; I was taking my hat off to him. I wondered if there was even a single person who didn't talk after being targeted by Konan.

"You are gifted with a superb imagination indeed."

"Well, it's a job that requires a good imagination."

A smile was on his mouth, a truly amused one.

"But there's one more. One more possibility why you could be protecting Youko-chan," his smile disappeared. "Namely, if you have certain proof that Youko Tsukimori has not killed anyone."

My consciousness was immediately drawn to the murder recipe.

"So... do you?"

"By no means."

"Too bad," he replied not regretfully in the least.

While my whole body was becoming stiff, he continued. In a most casual tone.

"By the way, I've been wondering—what's in that left breast pocket?"

My right hand reflexively grabbed at my left breast pocket.

Konan reacted on the spot.

He quickly pulled his hands out of his pockets as if drawing a sword and grabbed my chest the very next moment. After he had taken a large step towards me, my field of vision made a sudden turn.

I felt a blow on my back the next instant which then turned into pain that flashed through my entire body. The fierce pain caused me to heave one deep groan. My head started spinning and I became unable to move. However, despite the dull pain, I could hardly breath and couldn't even groan anymore.

It all happened so fast I had no clue what had just occurred to me.

By now I assume that he had thrown me down on the hard asphalt by using some technique similar to Haraigoshi, as it's called in Judo.

"I'm quite the feminist, you know, I don't want to be rough to the ladies. But on the other hand, I'm pretty much merciless towards guys!" he said casually as he sat astride me.

"...Ugh...you will get into trouble for this," I managed to squeeze out and scowled at Konan.

"No worries, no worries! As long as no one gets wind of it I'm safe!"

He didn't care in the least.

"Well, shall we take a look at what you're hiding there in that inside pocket?"

I firmly grabbed my jacket with both my hands.

"Oh? From your stubborn resistance I gather that there's really something in there that is related to Youko-chan?"

I shouldn't have averted my eyes when he came peeking deep into them.

"Ha! Bull's eye? My intuition sure is something! It's getting fun!" he laughed with an odd light in his eyes.

Konan tried to break my grip, which I, still stuck below him, frantically warded off with all my might.

"Whoa, whoa. You don't know when to give up!"

Konan scratched his head in a baffled way.

"Hah, there's no way around this," he then muttered. "Believe it or not, but I was in high school once, too. Back then I was actually quite the naughty boy, you know?"

He suddenly started talking of his past for some reason.

"And well, the place naughty boys like us used to select for deepening our friendship with our fists was, oh surprise, desolate passages below railways like this one! Maybe you get now why I asked you right in the beginning if you wanted to have a duel with me."

I failed to see what he was getting at, which was exactly what unsettled me.

"Can you guess why we usually selected somewhere under a railway?"

That moment, the ground started shaking slightly. I felt with my back that apparently a train was coming our way.

"The reason is—screams get drowned out in the noise of passing trains."

As he revealed that fact, a thunderous sound burst through the air, killing all other sounds.

"...you're joking... right?"

My words of shock were naturally drowned out as well.

The rattling of the train passing by above us shook my body. No, perhaps I was just trembling myself.

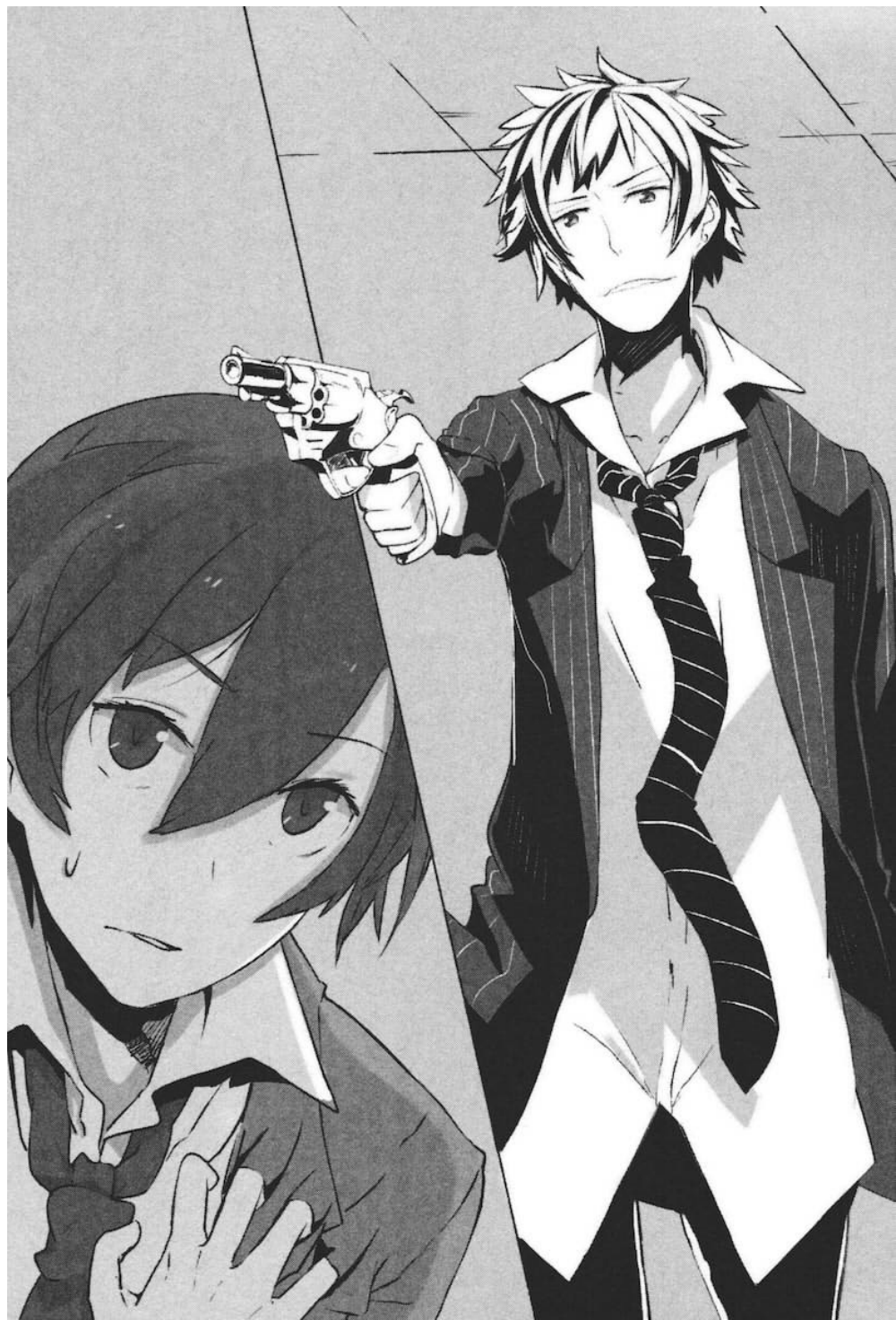
I felt the cold sensation of metal on my forehead.

Still utterly confused, I looked at what was in front of my eyes with a fixed gaze.

In his stretched out arm Konan was holding a black object. The cylindrical tip of that hard, black object was put on my forehead.

As soon as the thundering noise receded, giving way to the normal sounds, the man expressionlessly said, "If timed properly, that noise can even drown out a gunshot."

I gulped down without knowing.



...no way. He may have a tendency to lunacy, but he wouldn't possibly pull that trigger. This is bound to be a foolish performance to threaten me.

That's what my mind told me anyway.

My hair, however, stuck to my forehead. My heart was pounding and my breath was running wild. In contrast to my logical thinking, my body was so tense that I couldn't even blink.

"Now let go."

I put all the power I still had into my fingers.

"That's the spirit. Good boy."

My arms, however, were shaken off easily. Unfortunately, there had not been enough power left in me to resist him.

Konan skillfully undid the first two buttons with one hand and slid that hand into my inside pocket.

When he pulled it out again, he was holding a small folded scrap of paper between his fingers.

"...a scrap of paper, huh. What will I find on here, I wonder?"

He concluded that I had entirely lost the will to resist and removed the handgun from my forehead, and unfolded the sheet with both his hands.

Konan skimmed through it with a serious mien.

As he was still sitting on me, I couldn't move while he was reading the letter, thus I was forced to keep on looking at the concrete ceiling, which was not exactly interesting.

"Oh time! Go by!" I wished silently.

"Let me confirm one thing... who has written this 'recipe'?"

He thrust out the sheet before my eyes.

"I don't know," I hissed and looked away.

"...So my hunch didn't fail me," he said with a convinced tone. "Judging by your reaction, **you** have written this, huh."

I kept silent.

"At the very first glance I thought that the letters looked very, you know, 'boyish', so I did consider the possibility! But I mean, what's written there just doesn't match the image I have of you, you know? *You* and this, huh... What did your face look like when you wrote it? Oh, please don't tell me you wrote it with that poker face of yours!"

It was probably the poker face I had maintained that caused him to suddenly embrace his stomach and start trembling with tears in his eyes. He chuckled as the intensity of his tremble increased like the speed of plane that was rolling on a runway. And then,

[illegible]

He burst into a grand laughter. The plane had just soared into the sky.

His guffawing resounded through the tunnel. Laughter rained down on me from all sides with no mercy. I experienced the humiliation of being made a fool by a great mass.

"...aah, stop it, aah, I'm dying! I'm dying laughing! Aah, I haven't laughed like this in ages... I think for a while I'm gonna break out into a laughter just by recalling this," he said while still laughing with groans mixed in. "Aaa... I have to admit that that contrast got even me by surprise. Now that was something new. Never thought that you, our grouchy Nonomiya-kun, would write such an oh-so-sweet letter that would startle even the purest girl in love..."

Again, he was unable to suppress it and laughed out loud.

The title on the sheet he had thrust in front of me was—

—"Love Recipe"

The "Love Recipe" contained all kinds of flirt phrases and methods to win over a girl's heart. Words so sickeningly sweet that they didn't even lose to the taste of pancakes accidentally covered with a bottle of maple syrup, filled the whole page without leaving any gaps.

It was a sinister item indeed, of which a single bite would certainly cause nausea to any man like me without physical defense against sweet words.

If you write such a dangerous thing with your very own hands, with all your wit can offer, during an entire long night, then your life cannot be assured anymore. Even if you survived it, you would be scarred for life with a horrendous trauma.

An actual survivor states that living became hard just a few minutes after starting to write.

At last, satisfied with laughing, Konan asked me with a meek expression, "So? Do you want me to retire from the case now because of this?"

"It would be very much appreciated."

He grabbed my head with his hands and leaned over me. My dark field of vision became even darker.

"There's no way I could retire at such a half-baked state!" he declared from straight above with forceful eyes.

"But that's," I began and put on a confident smile. "That's only your view as a detective, right?"

"...What do you mean?"

A question mark appeared above him. Therefore, I grinned while answering his question.

"Right now you look extremely fulfilled!"

He could say what he wanted, but his eyes were sparkling like the eyes of a kid that had just arrived at an amusement park. To me Konan looked as though he was bursting with amusement.

"Haven't you had enough fun by now?"

Konan pondered over my words while stroking his chin.

He hadn't denied it when I said that it was not a sense of justice that made him choose the job as a detective.

What he had asserted, however, was that he wanted to enjoy humans and their relationships.

In short, Konan himself didn't care much if Tsukimori had killed her mother or not. Though finding out the truth was surely part of that hobby of his, it was by no means his personal goal.

So I thought about what his goal *really* was. The conclusion I came to was this:

From the moment I had realized that we resembled each other, I had felt that such an end was inevitable.

"...oh well, you got me!"

Konan spun his gun around his finger and stowed it away in the holster that was hidden under his jacket.

"My loss was decided the instant I laughed. After laughing badly like that I can't claim that I wasn't amused anymore."

When he stood up, he reached out his hand to me. I took it.

"Okay! I'll drop the case."

He then pulled me up onto my feet.

"...Thank you."

Words of appreciation automatically slipped out of my mouth. Apparently, I happened to be relieved.

Considering that we were similar, it wasn't hard to comprehend the principle of his actions, but I had no prospects of victory in terms of persuading him, an experienced speaker, into dropping the case. As a matter of fact, my first attempt had been beaten down by his overwhelming pressure.

Since the odds had been against me, I had prepared the "Love Recipe" as a trump card.

The main reason I had written it was to create unforeseeability. To surprise Konan with something that he would definitely not expect me to ever write. And finally, to take the wind out of his sails with that unforeseeability.

My vigorous resistance had not been played at all; I had wanted to keep my trump card for last, yes, I had even wanted to take it to the grave.

What I can say now is that I probably would have failed if I hadn't taken the bullet.

"Oh well, it was about time anyway, " Konan said while wiping off the dust on his suit with one hand. "Keep in mind that to the bigwigs this case is only a trifling incident that wouldn't even get into the news. Organizations, not only the police, have a tendency to avoid using time, money and workforce for trivial things, you know. After all, they wouldn't gain much for solving an incident no one cares about."

"Quite business-like, isn't it?" I followed his example and dusted off my uniform with both my hands.

"Indeed. If you think of it like that, maybe I'm actually something like an office worker," he nodded full of agreement. "Well, the point is that even I can't always keep running after every small incident, no matter how much everyone accepts it implicitly! I mean, come on, I'm capable, right? They want me on the big cases!"

He then folded the recipe and unaffectedly put it into the pocket of his suit.

"Hey, don't just stow that away in your pocket!" I hurriedly stopped him.

"Mh? What do you mean? That's *mine*, isn't it?"

"No, it's *mine*. Please return it to me."

"No chance."

"But there's no point if you have it, is there?"

"It's the treasure I dug up this time. It's an irreplaceable memento of you. I'm going to reread this recipe from time to time and remember you and the happy days we spent together."

"That's a lie. You're definitely going to make a fool of me!"

"Oh? I'm busted."

I could not help sighing, seeing he was as undaunted as always.

"Come on, isn't that quite a good deal? For just a mere scrap of paper I'll withdraw from this case! Now if that's not some outstanding treatment!"

"It's not a physical problem, but a very psychological one."

"Well, you should be able to take some scars as a boy."

Konan put on a wry smile as he lit on a cigarette.

"...even I think once in a while, you know, that I've got a bothersome personality. But we can't just change our hobbies or our values, right?"

I found myself agreeing with the musing Konan before me.

"They say it's possible to select one's way of life, but I think that's just a flowery lie. At least I could *not* choose another one. Choosing another way of life means throwing away all you've done so far and becoming a new self, don't you agree? I like myself the way I am now. So I have no choice but to stick to my current principles!"

Then he showed the grin that truly suited him.

"An acquaintance of mine said something similar. Something along the lines of the world's very setup being 'shit', so one should live by one's own rules."

"Oho. We would surely get on well."

"Yes, indeed. I don't know about her, but you would surely like her."

"So it's a woman?"

"Yes."

"Woho, definitely introduce me to her one of these days."

"If I find some time."

"By the way..."

"Yes?"

"—What was it really? What have you been hiding?"

I was unable to answer him right away.

Konan had assured me he'd drop this case. And he was surely not someone who broke promises.

But still I just couldn't bring myself to let anyone else know about the murder recipe.

However, Konan suddenly tousled my hair with his sinewy hand.

"Sorry. Forget that. That question was 'thoughtless' as you would call it, right?"

He blew some smoke toward the asphalt.

The railway started to creak, causing the entire tunnel to vibrate, and erased all other sounds around us.

During the time that allowed no other sounds, Konan made himself at home and enjoyed his cigarette, whereas I had my gaze fixed on the far away blue sky as if enjoying a nightly read.

At last, the train passed by and took its thunderous sound with it.

"Good luck, Nonomiya-kun. It was a short time with you, but I really enjoyed it!"

That was the first thing I heard again.

"I too... relatively enjoyed those days."

"Relatively?! Oh boy...," he said and leisurely walked towards the exit, his shoes squeaking. I silently gazed at his back as he waved his hand extravagantly.

"...Ah, let me correct one thing at the end." The footsteps stopped near the entrance of the passage. "Satisfied, my ass! Just so you know! I am not at all satisfied! I wanted to play much more with you and Youko-chan!"

He resembled a brat that didn't want his summer holidays to end so much that I had to laugh, "Oh boy...!"

"Goodbye."

"Yes!"

It was not farewell forever, but we weren't going to see each other for quite a while. We may live in the same town, but there wouldn't be many occasions to meet each other. Our separate ways had merely happened to cross by chance this time. That was the relationship between us, between Konan and me, two persons of different ages and positions.

"Right! I almost forgot—"

He quickly turned around and skillfully squinted one eye.

"Actually, I fancy women and men all the same!"

".....eh?"

He gave me a wave with his flat hand, "*Byeeee!*" and disappeared into the light, leaving me behind dumbfounded.

"...'Bi'? Don't mess with me!"

I was sure it had to be another special bad joke of his and that he was having his fun with me.

"How stupid," I shook my head.

I frantically tried to make myself believe that it *was* a joke, but I just couldn't do anything about the goosebumps I had gotten all over.

Geez, Konan remained a good-for-nothing to the bitter end. I had never met such a good-for-nothing in my entire life. There can't be many absurd people like him in the world. I figured that I may not meet someone like him again.

Therefore, it was a relatively regrettable farewell for me.

After raising my hand once, I turned around and walked towards the exit on the opposite side.

By the time I left the tunnel, my mind was occupied with only her and no one else.

[Moonlight]

It was night. I called her.

— I want to speak to you.

I made an appointment to meet her alone.

Since it was going to take some time, the meeting was set to Saturday after work. She suggested we meet at her home, but I rejected. I had no good memories there.

Hence, she suggested a park on a hill. It was the park where her mother had fallen. I responded right away.

— Got it.

Of course I was wary because she chose that park of all places, but my interest in the view from there won.

Come to think of it, she was not in the least surprised by my sudden request. She even accepted it readily.

I guess she had expected that day to come.

No, that wasn't quite right.

She had been waiting for it with anticipation.

That's what her cheerful voice sounded like—as if talking about a date.

It was a moonlit night.

A golden moon hung in the sky, reigning over the stars like their king, and lit the earth with light so strong one almost forgot what time it was.

The park was situated a few minutes' walk past Tsukimori's home.

By the time the viridian green fence of the park came into view, my breath was so wild and faint that I expected to faint at any moment.

I checked the time on my watch. It was just past eleven, which was reasonable because I had returned home once, taken a shower and put on a change of clothes.

Well, I had wanted to go to the park right after finishing work, but Tsukimori had stopped me.

She insisted on a neat appearance for our first date.

Leaving aside the essential fact that this wasn't a date, I had accepted her suggestion. And it had been the right thing to do.

I had needed some time to draw a line between me and my everyday life.

I reached the entrance of the park. It was nothing special; just a small space with some trees and playground equipment sparsely scattered about. The only object that stood out was a white wooden clock tower near the cliff.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Fresh air filled my lungs. I slowly exhaled, checked my left breast pocket for the last time, and entered the park.

"—I was about to get tired of waiting."

I squinted my eyes in the direction of the voice.

"But I ought to be thankful that you came properly, right?"

When I grasped her figure with my eyes, I couldn't help but hold my breath. A snow white Tsukimori was sitting on the top of the red jungle-gym.

"Wearing all black truly suits you, Nonomiya-kun."

Except for the white shirt I wore under my jacket, I was indeed clad all in black.

Tsukimori giggled, "But that is exactly what I expected, so I matched my clothes to yours and dressed myself all in white."

She wore a white dress and white pumps. She had also draped a semi-transparent white shawl around her shoulders and adorned her hair with a white ornament.

From my perspective, snow white Tsukimori was holding the moon on her shoulders.

"Shall we start our date, then?"

Youko Tsukimori crossed her legs and leaned on her elbow, her head slightly tilted. A lock of her beautiful black hair curled down to her mouth.

It was a dreamlike scene. I quickly shook my head to rid it of the impression.

"...the day after you asked me to go out with you, you said that it was necessary for both of us to deepen our mutual understanding, right?"

"Yes," she nodded.

"You also said that it was fine for me to make a decision after we had come to know each other better, right?"

"Yes," she squinted an eye.

"Unfortunately, I still don't understand you very well. We're still quite far from a date."

"What exactly do you want to know from me then?"

—"Everything," I almost answered. But judging by her confident smile, there was only one thing to say.

"You killed her, didn't you?"

The next moment, she leaped from the top of the jungle-gym into the dark blue sky.

Her shawl spread out to both her sides like the wings of a swan, then she landed softly

like a feather that had fallen from those wings.

"What am I going to hear from you now?"

"Well, you could call it," I pretended to ponder and continued with my usual poker face, "the solution of the riddle called Youko Tsukimori."

Unperturbed, Tsukimori kept smiling like always.

"I see, that seems much more interesting than a date."

But that's how I wanted her to be; my worthy adversary.

At one time I had come to the conclusion that Tsukimori had not killed anyone because I was sure that she wouldn't do something that foolish.

However, the situation had made a sudden turn with the appearance of a man of outstanding perspicacity. It didn't take long until my theory was negated due to several doubtful aspects and contradictions brought to light by Konan one after another.

In a sense, it had been inevitable for my doubts to be revived, considering how well I knew her and that the murder recipe was in my hands.

One might ask why I had concluded that she was absolutely innocent in the first place.

It is true that I had had several clues that suggested that her mother was guilty, like the fact that the murder recipe had been written by her. However, at the same time I had also been aware that those clues did not necessarily prove Tsukimori's innocence.

I myself had been the decisive factor in my belief of her innocence.

Only now I realized that I had probably strongly wished that she wasn't a murderer back then. One could say that my imagination was steered that way because I didn't want to lose the person I was so interested in.

In other words, what made her innocent had been my own desire.

I sat down on a railing, while she got on a blue swing.

I started explaining to her one reason after another why I doubted her.

The suspiciously well-timed call from the cooking school, the fact that her mobile phone had been set to silent mode, her unnatural behavior when getting me a towel instead of starting the search for her mother, and the fact that the suicide note was written not by hand but on the computer. Furthermore, I told her about my hypothesis that she had wanted to make me the finder of that suicide note.

Tsukimori quietly listened to my explanation and nodded once in a while without denying or acknowledging anything.

When at last she had heard me out, she let her gaze wander in the night sky, seeming deep in thought, before she asked with certainty, "Did you borrow those theories from Konan-san?"

I nodded. As she had guessed, most of my arguments had appeared in the conversations with Konan.

"But I agree with them, so you can think of them as my own opinion."

Tsukimori put on a surprised expression.

"That's the sort of thing you spoke about in my absence?" she scowled at me and pursed her lips slightly. "How mean! Do both of you doubt me?"

"No," I shook my head. "Konan-san has nothing to do with it anymore. I'm the only one doubting you."

She gasped in admiration, "It is really surprising that Konan-san stopped doubting me despite seeming so tenacious. What magic did you use, Nonomiya-kun?"

"It's all thanks to the hint you gave me," I beat around the bush and saved myself from mentioning the "Love Recipe".

"If you want to know what he thinks, just think about what you would do in his case!"

As a matter of fact, if not for those words, I probably would have still been at a loss for what to do about Konan.

"Oh, did I happen to be a help?" smiled Tsukimori. Her soft glance resembled a gentle sister's who rejoiced over one of her little brother's accomplishments.

Which caused me to let out a deep, heavy sigh.

"...I see... so she *did* give me a hint," I thought to myself.

Considering how she had immediately realized that I was borrowing Konan's words, she had probably been perfectly aware of Konan and me doubting her all along.

With that in mind, she seemed like a truly cunning actress, reconsidering the evening when we were thrown out by Mirai-san; her blatantly offensive attitude towards me hadn't been normal at all, and the way she had brought up Konan had been rather unnatural as well.

I stopped counting, but as it seemed, she had been playing with me again. I had to admit it: she was a much better actor than I.

Because I was keeping quiet, she tilted her head slightly, "Mh?"

There had been no creaks in her smile from beginning to end. Despite me having labeled her a "murderer".

Her smile was something like a trademark. In the mind of everyone else, Youko Tsukimori was probably depicted as an ever-smiling holy woman.

That was, however, not the Youko Tsukimori I wanted to see. Right now I was brooding over how I might freeze that smile of hers.

My fingers automatically groped for my left breast pocket.

"...right, there's something I want to give you."

There was no way around using 'it' after all. I slid my hand into my jacket.

What I produced was a four times folded scrap of paper. "What's this?" Tsukimori asked while snatching it away from me.

I watched Tsukimori look down at the unfolded sheet.

With her gaze still cast down, she whispered, "...I am happy about anything you give me, but this is not exactly a thoughtful present."

"I can't help it: it's not a present, after all. I'm merely returning something to its

owner," I didn't avert my gaze from her, "It's yours, isn't it?"

I stared her in the eyes, not daring to breath or even blink. It's fair to say that I had protected *this* solely for this very moment. By no means I wanted to miss her reaction to it.

She raised her head with a smile shaped like a crescent moon.

"Yes, it is!" she admitted surprisingly readily.

"Then let's now talk about this—'murder recipe'."

This was the trump card I had successfully protected from Konan.

She laughed dryly, "So there is no way around it after all, is there? Well, of course you would never miss out on such an 'intriguing subject', right?"

At first glance, Tsukimori was the same as always.

"Truth to be told, I would rather not, but I might be able to answer your expectations if that is your wish. But in return, promise me—"

But I asked myself: did she realize the slight change that had come over her?

"—that you won't hate me. Okay?"

She was smiling as usual, but her eyes were serious.

I was observing a side of Youko Tsukimori that nobody knew. It felt as though I had come a step closer to her. Of course, though, I was not at all satisfied with just that.

I wanted to see more of her unknown side.

But no need to rush things; there was more than enough time until sunrise.

"...You knew it all along, right?"

"What?"

"That the murder recipe had come into my hands."

I had always had a hunch. After all, she had suddenly asked me to go out with her even though we had not spoken to each other much, save for greetings. She had approached me shortly after I had obtained the murder recipe.

But it was only now that I was convinced. Her poor reaction proved that she was not surprised at all.

Tsukimori raised and lowered her brow multiple times in hesitation.

"I had noticed, yes," she nodded calmly at last. "Do you remember what happened in the classroom the morning after I lost the recipe?"

I recalled the morning in question to mind as she told me.

"That morning you addressed me, Nonomiya-kun. Much to my surprise. Therefore, I thought about the reason for that. It didn't take long until I found the answer."

"...So I dug my own grave, huh," I facepalmed automatically.

What a fool I had been for revealing myself! I had been unable to suppress my curiosity and addressed her that morning, but indeed, it was not normal for me to do so with our relationship at the time.

I shook my head fiercely to get rid of stray thoughts, took a deep breath and continued as composedly as I could manage.

"...When I first obtained the murder recipe," I proceeded with the subject as if to bury the mistake I had committed, "I thought that you had written it. I didn't even doubt that the owner was equivalent to the author. The word 'recipe', however, has been bothering me since then. Wouldn't it normally be a 'murder plan'?"

Only my voice resounded throughout the moonlit park.

"But when I learned that your mother was a teacher at a cooking school, I realized that the word 'recipe' was probably very common to her—and sure enough, your mother has written it. A handwritten note of hers, which I presumed to borrow from your home, matched the handwriting of the recipe."

"You never fail to live up to my expectations, Nonomiya-kun," she interjected and closed her mouth again.

A meaningful statement, to be sure, but no denial of what I had said.

"Anyway, for that matter I want to ask why your mother's recipe was in your possession?"

I leaned a little forward to sneak a peek at her expression.

"It was shortly after I started high school when I found her recipe purely by chance—"

It was calm and musing.

"—I realized right away who my mother meant to kill."

"Your father."

"Yes. By the way, this is not the only murder recipe; there are more of them. Perhaps, there are even some I haven't found yet."

"...I didn't expect that."

I was intrigued to read those as well.

"I think my mother didn't realize that I knew about those recipes until the very end. I kept it a secret from her."

"What were your thoughts about it? What did you intend to do after you had obtained the recipes?"

"Well..."

While gazing vacantly in the air, she brushed away her hair beside the ear with her finger. Probably, she was searching for the right words.

"...when I first read the recipe, I was surprised that she also had such an 'ugly' face."

I found myself staring at her.

"I knew her as a typical housewife. A woman who would always pay attention to her appearance and her behavior."

"...that's quite hard to imagine from the impression I got from her during the funeral ceremony."

The howling image of her broken mother soothed by a black-dressed Tsukimori flashed up in my mind. I was disturbed by how my fragile image of her crumbled to dust.

"I do not know what you imagined her to have been like, but you should not forget whose mother she was," Tsukimori put on a smile appropriate to adorn the cover of a fashion magazine, "She was *my* mother."

Like daughter, like mother? No, the proper order would be "Like mother, like daughter"? Either way, the moment I thought about it in that way, it was surprisingly easy to have a new image of her. By analogy, the same must have applied to her father as well.

"My mother worked as a teacher in a cooking school, the largest one in the area. She held classes for countless students everyday. Apparently, she even made appearances on a cooking show on local television from time to time, and she had published a few cookbooks. I heard she was quite famous in the cooking scene, as 'the beautiful culinary scientist'."

My image of her mother was being remodeled.

"Now imagine such a woman writing such a cheap thing. I was completely stunned," she shrugged slightly, expressing her amazement.

"*Cheap*, huh?" I repeated a certain meaningful word she had uttered.

"But you thought the same, didn't you? After reading it, I seriously wondered if she really intended to kill someone with it. It's not even close to a plan. Now, I think that she might have chosen the word 'recipe' because she was aware that it was too crude to be called a plan."

"Aah, I see."

I was entirely of the same mind.

"Indeed, for a murder plan, it's extremely unpolished and seems incomplete. You could consider yourself lucky if it succeeded once in a hundred times."

"Mm," she agreed at first, but my continuation made her raise her brow.

"But I think that this lack of polish is exactly what makes the recipe useful."

"What do you mean?"

I was seeing the amateurish content in a different light than Tsukimori. I had thought about it like that since the very beginning.

"Who would imagine such a luck-based murder plan could exist?"

Tsukimori was at a loss for words. Of course she was. A few moments before, she had stated that she could have never imagined her mother writing something like that.

"If hypothetically that plan worked out favorably, wouldn't it indeed look like a 'mishap'?"

"That is an amusing alternative way of thinking about it," she nodded in a impressed tone.

I continued, "I know of one incident that virtually proves my hypothesis—"

"—the accident of my father, right?" she answered before I could finish.

"...you admit it?"

I was a little startled at her unexpected reaction.

"What is there to deny? It is only natural that one would harbor doubts about that accident even having read the recipe only once."

She shook the sheet beside her head, holding it with her fingertips.

I finally noticed what it was that might have been bothering me about her.

"Until I found the recipes, I had no idea that my mother had a such an impetuous side. I suppose that her motive was jealousy — even though my parents didn't care about each other — because my father apparently had a mistress. Maybe she just couldn't accept it that he had a woman other than her. In that sense, women might generally be more jealous than men. You should be careful too, Nonomiya-kun."

Even though it was about her mother, about her family, I sensed a kind of distance in her indifferent tone. As if she wasn't concerned. As if she was talking about some rumors from the neighborhood.

My conviction deepened.

"I can't help but see you as the murderer of your parents," I said frankly, whereupon Tsukimori sneered at me.

"Even though I have no reason?"

She cocked her head while maintaining her smile.

"It's not like I'm paying no heed to your motive. I'm very interested actually. But if I look at it from a perspective that solely deals with whether it's possible or not — I have long since come to the conclusion that you *could* do it."

Tsukimori narrowed her eyes to a crescent moon-like form for a second.

"You have already admitted that what's written in the murder recipe rather closely resembles the traffic accident of your father. Now, if it was not an unlucky accident but a willfully committed incident, it couldn't possibly be carried out by someone who hadn't read the recipe, right?"

Tsukimori put her chin on her hand and probed me with her gaze.

"Or, put the other way round, it could only be carried out by someone who *has* read the recipe, right?"

I closed my eyes and took a breath.

"I know of exactly three persons who read the recipe before the accident of your father occurred. Firstly, the author of the recipe, your mother. Secondly, I, of course, because I obtained it by chance, and finally—"

I pointed at the report sheet she held in her hand.

"—the person who lost the recipe—Youko Tsukimori. You."

Tsukimori remained wordless.

"I am convinced that you, Youko Tsukimori, could have carried out such a plan, no matter how cheap and unrefined it was."

She broke her silence and motionlessness with a whisper.

"...do you know how I am feeling?"

"If I were able to understand your feelings so easily, I wouldn't be dancing to your tune all the time."

"I am really moved right now. I feel so much love from you because you understand me so much, though you are probably going to say I am wrong, with your usual cold tone."

"You're wrong."

I fulfilled her request with an extra large topping of coldness.

She really made no sense to me. Even though I had accused her of murder, she smiled without change, neither provoked nor alarmed. Her unaffected behavior almost made me think that she might not be hiding anything after all.

Was it absolute self-confidence that loomed behind that composure of hers? Was she confident to ward off any accusations I could throw at her?

This isn't enough. Unless I delve deeper and break her shell from the inside, I will never see what I seek.

"...something has been bothering me almost from the beginning," I began, "Aren't you entirely too objective toward your own parents? You're as calm as if you were talking about complete strangers."

Tsukimori put on a slightly doubtful expression.

"Do you think so? I'm seventeen and not of the age to be dependent on my parents anymore, am I not? Isn't the distance between parents and teenager quite similar in other households?"

I immediately objected strongly, "No, it isn't."

Tsukimori sealed her mouth and scowled at me.

"Oh come on, there's clearly something strange. I mean, your mother was drawing up a plan to kill your father! If you're a family, you'd normally try to stop her, wouldn't you?"

Tsukimori widened her eyes for an instant.

"Do you know why my first question was about your actions after finding the recipes? It's because I hoped you would say that you wanted to discourage her. But you only voiced your thoughts on the contents of the recipes—"

She opened her mouth slightly, wanting to say something.

"—did you even once think about stopping her?"

The helpless expression Tsukimori showed that moment was a clearer answer than any words could have been.

She huddled up, embracing her slender legs.

"While you had a rather blank relationship with your parents without doubt, strangely enough there are no indications that you were on bad terms with them either."

Reconsidering the many reactions I had gotten from Tsukimori in the past, I found that she had *not* unconcerned about the loss of her "community", known as family. After losing her parents, she had seemed very fragile from time to time. I was convinced that she had by no means wished to lose her family.

"You found them uninteresting, didn't you?"

That's what I thus concluded.

If *I* was forced to talk about something that didn't interest me, I assume that I would speak with a certain distance as well.

"...rather than saying that I had no interest, it would be appropriate to say that there was no need for us to be interested in each other," she muttered. "I didn't hate my parents, you know? Honestly. It is just that the Tsukimori family was built around the

idea of individualism. It was an unwritten rule that we stayed out of each others' business. In fact, it was only because of that rule that we were able to remain a harmonious family."

As if reminiscing, Tsukimori narrowed her eyes slightly.

"I was already able to do anything on my own when I was still young. My mother, too, would have had no problems living without my father. As for him, he merely sustained the budget to fulfill his role as the man of the house, but he didn't interfere in the household itself. Whether you believe it or not, when I was young I thought of him only as a kindhearted uncle who gave us money."

Her smile bent in self-deprecation.

"Just as you noted, I did not think about stopping my mother."

With a powerless smile, she cast her eyes down.

"I was able to accept the murder recipe without problems because I assumed that my mother had her own thoughts and her own life. But I suppose that I should have stopped her, just like you said."

She clenched her fist, her white fingers digging into her palm.

"If I had been raised in a different kind of family, I might have acted differently."

Tsukimori raised her face.

"But you know," she said with a vacant voice, "That's the way I have been brought up since the moment I was born."

Her eyes were breathtakingly clear. There was not a particle of regret in her honest and majestic appearance. In my opinion, Youko Tsukimori was strong.

But at the same time she was just as lonely.

During that moment of sublimity, she was beautiful and ephemeral like a mirage,

setting butterflies in my stomach aflutter.

"Weren't you lonely?"

She promptly answered my question with a shake of her head. "Not at all," she smiled.

Relying on no one seemed like a lonely life to me. She herself, however, claimed she had not been.

"Even now?" I posed my denied question once more. "Are you still not lonely even now that your parents have passed away?"

I found that to be an awfully desolate way of life. Maybe I was just seeing things, but Tsukimori seemed lonely to me as she sat there wordlessly.

The next moment she put on a slightly awkward smile and looked up at the night sky. The moon reflected in her eyes gave them a golden shine.

When she returned her gaze to me, she declared, "I am not lonely—"

The teasing attitude she usually had toward me was absent.

"—because you are here for me now, Nonomiya-kun."

I saw that neither in her eyes nor on her lips was a smile. She was entirely serious.

This was the memorable moment in which I finally succeeded in freezing her smile.

The clock tower was about to strike twelve.

She had no strong motive to kill her parents. At least, I could find none.

Furthermore, my view that Youko Tsukimori was not a girl that would do something as foolish as murder had already become an unshakable fact for me.

And yet her parents were no more.

I whispered, "...I don't know how to describe this feeling."

Which words would be appropriate?

I stood up from the railing because I couldn't sit still anymore and strolled into the park on my own, leaving her behind.

While ordering my thoughts, I walked slowly and deliberately felt the earth under my feet with each step. My legs led me unconsciously towards the cliff with a good view over the town.

At last I reached the boundary between park and cliff.

The boundary was marked by a rusty, viridian green fence a little higher than my waist. I bent over it and looked down. I figured that it wouldn't take much to fall over it and down the steep slope.

I rested my crossed arms and my chin on the fence, which caused the entire fence bordering the park to bend towards one side a little. I looked down at the town.

The town filled my field of vision with all its shining lights. It was far from the stunning skyline of a metropolis at night, but I was still deeply moved when considering my hometown.

Despite its small size, there was always something going on. That night, too, there must have been a red sports-car driven by that man somewhere down there. Was the chocolate-addict still up? That little girl who resembled a pygmy marmoset was definitely already a resident of dreamland.

The faces of various people I knew crossed my mind like a slideshow.

"Isn't it captivating? This is what I meant to show you, Nonomiya-kun."

The person who flashed up last and by far most vividly was in sync with the person who was beholding the town right by my side.

A chilly gust ruffled her hair. She hugged herself because of the coldness.

That scene reminded me of that rainy day when she had been in her cold, wet uniform.

There was no way I could forget how in that night I had asked her why people killed

others. Of course, I hadn't forgotten her answer, either.

The instant I recalled that answer, my body spontaneously started to tremble, followed by a chuckle of mine.

"...I found the answer at last. I finally realized what made you kill your parents!" I whispered.

She only commented calmly, "I see."

She was at the edge of my vision, and I was at the corner of hers, as I noticed then.

"Because you felt like it."

As I laughingly said it, she answered with the smile of a girl that had just received some candy, "You're great."

As she had told me that night, 'feeling like it' was the only way to explain an action devoid of reason.

I had laughed because it was such a silly answer. Who would believe such a thing?

The only ones able to comprehend it were me and — Youko Tsukimori.

Suddenly, she drew closer.

"...if all you say is true, then I am a horrible woman," she whispered softly into my ear, "Killed my parents, deceived everyone, tricked you and still living on without any worries."

Then—the semi-transparent shawl she had worn floated to the ground.

"But it cannot be denied: there are some rare cases of people that are not bound to the rules. People who are not restricted by anything, who are ridiculously free—"

I was taken aback. She had hopped on the fence without a moment's hesitation-causing it to slowly bend towards the abyss along with her.

"—Nonomiya-kun. You decide! If you don't punish me, the horrible woman Youko Tsukimori will remain at large."

Sitting on the fence, she did the unbelievable: she leaned backwards over the abyss. Her hair reached out toward the bottomless darkness. Only her white slender arms were sustaining her equally slender body now. The smooth curve of her snow white neck was exposed right in front of my eyes.

"Should you judge that I am not worthy to live... you understand, right?"

A slight push against her chest would be enough to send her down the cliff.

"...Are you out of your mind? Do you understand what you are saying?"

I doubted her sanity.

"Who knows? I consider myself to be in my right mind. Well, it is true though that I might be a little off in the head for liking an oddball like you."

As if enjoying the bath in the moonlight, she shut her eyes with a tranquil expression.

"I decided long ago to devote my all to my 'destined one'. You can believe me on that."

It appeared that "everything" included her life as well.

"...I absolutely fail to understand your current state of mind. What on earth is a destined person to you?"

Her reply was short and clear.

"My prince."

Her words were accompanied by a transcendently blissful smile. Considering the utter absence of fear in her face, she was serious.

Suddenly, the final appearance of her mother, which Konan had described to me,

flashed through my mind. A shiver ran down my spine. I had accidentally imagined a very special scene.

The stunningly beautiful scene of Youko Tsukimori's dead body surrounded by countless purple blooming azaleas — had been painted by my imagination.

I gulped. I flushed from the core. Before I knew it, my fingers had reached out to her chest.

My fingertips touched the bulge of her breasts. A short sigh escaped her and she stretched the toes of her white pumps.

My blood began to boil from the excitement that gripped me. Oh, what a sweet temptation it was! One mere finger of mine had the right to pass sentence on *Youko Tsukimori's* life.

Her neat snow-white dress looked like a burial shroud in my eyes at that moment.

She had no doubt made all necessary preparations. I suspected her intended scenario was along the lines of "heartbroken girl follows her parents into death".

In other words, nobody would punish me if I pushed her down.

She had called me her prince. If I really was a prince, my designated role would probably be freeing the princess who was being held captive in the castle.

...Tsukimori. I am sorry for belying your expectations, but I'm afraid I'm not a prince. I am and will only ever be Villager A. That's the role that suits me best.

My heart pounded against my chest. My wild breath urged me to run free. After taking a deep breath and firmly clenching my teeth, I slowly reached out for the girl in burial cloth — slid my arm around her delicate back and pulled her towards me with all my might.

The excessive momentum caused me to fall backward with her in my arms. While I was still struggling with the pain in my back, she sat up astride me.

"...please don't forget," she began as she laid one hand on her chest, "that this is the life you have saved."

You have picked up that puppy, so bear responsibility and look after it yourself—remembering words my mother had said ages ago, my spirits hit rock bottom. Since when had I become such a nice guy?

"...did you test me?"

"Don't worry, I am confident in myself. You will definitely not regret that you have saved me."

She optimistically clenched her fist in front of her. That almost provokingly lovely smile she showed me gave me the conviction that she had foreseen this turn of events from the very beginning.

I sneered.

"I've long regretted —"

—that I met you.

"Sorry, but could you get off me?"

She was boldly sitting on my pelvis. For now, I just wanted to do something about her lack of manners.

Unfortunately though, she apparently didn't intend to get off. She went on her knees, bent over me while putting her hands left and right of my head and started talking from right above me, with her eyes staring into mine. "What are you going to do? What do you want to do? Do you want to tell the police about the recipe and the things I have told you just now?"

As her charming lips formed words, my hair was softly stroked by her ticklish breath.

"I won't stop you if that is what you want to do!"

Apparently, she was not specifically provoking me; while her expression *was* mild as always, her voice had taken on an earnest tone.

"You're quite daring, aren't you?"

I scowled at her from below.

"Is it because you are confident that you can trick the police? Or is it because you are belittling me?"

"Wrong on both counts!" she shook her hair smoothly. "I just know more than anyone else that I am innocent."

She was composed.

"Let us do a little test... if there was an incident that most clearly implied murder and I told you it was just an accident that happened because of a chain of unfortunate coincidences, would you believe me?"

The hair that fell down from right above swayed in a nightly breeze and tickled the tip of my nose.

"...of course not!"

Because Tsukimori maintained perfect composure, I hesitated for a moment.

"Right? You don't believe me anyway, so I just let you do whatever you want."

The next moment, she formed a soft smile, accompanied by dancing feathers in my imagination.

"But please remember that there is only one truth for me."

Can someone who laughs so purely be a liar?

I honestly did not know.

"Besides, you are the one I chose. So there should be nothing strange about respecting your decision, even if it differs from the answer I would wish for."

"Chose?" I repeated suspiciously.

The sound was different from the "destined one" sort of "chose" that she had used before. I estimated the nuance to be something along the lines of "entrusted".

"There is one thing you have gotten wrong, Nonomiya-kun."

"What do you mean?"

"It is not at all a coincidence that you have the murder recipe."

".....eh?"

I raised a voice of surprise.

"Please recall the day when you found the murder recipe."

It was still vividly in my mind. It had happened after school. I had found the murder recipe in her notebook, which she had dropped on the ground.

She suddenly giggled.

"I am a very capable person, if I say so myself, am I not? Do you think that someone like me—"

The face she showed me then was going to remain clear in my memory for a long time. Her face looked staggeringly cruel and yet so beautiful.

"—would lose something as important as the murder recipe?"

No way. Such a mistake was unthinkable if it was for her, for she was the only absolutely perfect human in the world I knew of.

On that day back then I had participated in a meeting — the regular meeting of the class officers. The male class officer of our class was me. So, who was the female one?

It was the person before my very eyes.

Now that I think about it, she hurried back to the classroom right after the meeting had finished. I figure that she did that in order to buy time, so she could make sure the murder recipe would fall into my hands "by chance".

How could I overlook such a basic thing? That she had been searching for the recipe

the following morning was most likely just an act to make me believe she had lost it "by chance", too.

It looked like I had been dancing to her tune since the very beginning. That humiliating fact numbed my limbs and even brought terror upon me. Not a groan could be heard from me in this shocked state.

Tsukimori got off me while giggling.

"There is not one thing that didn't work out the way I wanted. There is not one thing that I couldn't have obtained if I wanted. My wishes define how matters settle."

Normally, those statements would have been extremely haughty, but they sounded like logical facts when it was Youko Tsukimori speaking.

"But don't you think that such a life is incredibly boring and listless? Is there a point in leading such a life?"

She walked towards her shawl on the ground.

"You cannot be excited about a present when you already know what is inside," she slouched her shoulders slightly. "Nevertheless, I did not decide against being the Youko Tsukimori everyone desired, because it is simple to play the model student and it did not feel bad to live up to their expectations."

After picking it up, she draped the shawl around her shoulders again, skipped towards me with light steps reminiscent of a ballerina and landed right beside my head. Then a thick shadow covered my field of vision entirely, so that I was almost left with the belief that the moon had been covered by dark clouds. In fact, she had bent right over me with her hands at her hips.

"Do you want to know why I entrusted you with the recipe, Nonomiya-kun?"

It was already an almost annoyingly definite fact to me that when she put on such a scheming expression, the answer could not be any good.

"It is because you looked more bored with your life than anyone else I have ever met!" she said as if she had found something dear.

I averted my gaze.

Bullseye.

As she had guessed, I had always lamented over how boring the world seemed to me. My imagination used to be my haven to heal me from the boredom of my daily life.

I picked up the murder recipe and stood up.

"You exceeded all my expectations. Talking with you turned out to be exciting, Nonomiya-kun. Every day became thrilling as soon as you entered my life. My heart throbbed more than in anyone else's company. I realized right away that you were my 'destined one'. Thus, it was easy to become crazy about you."

Then everything had gone according to her plan and I, as foolish as I had been, readily took the compelling bait, the murder recipe.

With heavy steps I walked back to the fence as if drawn to it. By the sound of her steps I noticed that she hurried after me.

"...Ah!"

The fence creaked. She had strongly gripped it and was looking down the black clear space right at my side, leaning over. She quickly realized that there was nothing she could do about it anymore, straightened up again and turned to me.

"...won't you regret that?"

My right arm was fully stretched out over the fence.

A white paper plane was drawing circles in the air as it slowly descended into the bottomless darkness. The plane was probably going to get caught somewhere on the cliff, be exposed to weather for months and finally return to dust.

"It's okay. There's no need for it anymore."

I was the same. I, too, hadn't searched for the truth behind the murder recipe because of a sense of justice.

"Ah, will you at last believe me that I am innocent?"

I turned towards her smiling face and declared coldly, "Do you have sawdust between your ears? Of course I'm still doubting you!"

She narrowed her eyes in doubt.

"You don't make sense. Why did you throw away the murder recipe then?"

"Who would buy such an absurd story? I mean, how should I answer the police if they asked me for the reason why you killed your parents? Do you think I would get through with 'Oh, it looks like she felt like it'?"

Without knowing her well, understanding her motive would be very difficult. Having seen Youko Tsukimori's true face, I was the only who could ever nod, facing such a claim.

"But do you have another choice? It is the answer you have worked out after all. Leaving aside whether they believe you or not," she said in a playful tone.

"That's stupid. I would only embarrass myself," answered as I shook my head.

The magic had been lost since the second I had thrust the murder recipe, my trump card, before her and revealed its contents.

I had realized that, in the end, the murder recipe was nothing more than "just a scrap of paper".

She had taught me that it was not the recipe itself that was of value, though I had cherished it like life itself, but the fact that it was "Youko Tsukimori's" murder recipe.

At that moment, after recovering from the shock of having been led by the nose by her all the time, a different emotion overcame me.

As much as it didn't match my character, that emotion could be described as the protective instinct.

By her own admission, she had entrusted the recipe to me because I had looked more bored with my life than anyone else. Because she had concluded that I would no doubt show interest in the thrill the murder recipe offered.

Definitely unintended, but I had undeniably provided considerable entertainment.

In short, she had been seeking for some kind of thrill for her boring daily life as well. In this sense, our interests had complemented each other without my knowledge.

However, the thing is that I unfortunately came up with another interpretation.

—It happened to me that she may have been overwhelmed by the murder recipe.

She was shaken. The discovery of the murder recipe, and a completely unexpected side of her mother along with it, disturbed her more than she could have imagined. Subconsciously she kept looking for a way to do something about that state of things and in the end entrusted me, whom she had found after long searching, with the murder recipe.

That signal was not strong enough to be called an SOS. Probably, she merely wanted to share the information. Maybe she just wanted someone to know.

The burden was indeed a bit too heavy to carry alone.

Maybe I was simply reading too much into it, but I couldn't do anything about it, since that was the impression I got. My vexation was cleared away in a split second.

The thought that *Youko Tsukimori*, the only person that could pride herself on being perfect, was shaken like a helpless girl and relied on me caused my heart to beat faster than ever.

Now aren't we lovely, it throbbed.

My gaze fell on the number that was indicated on the clock tower behind her.

"Already past midnight?"

When I whispered so, she turned around with vim and vigor, spinning the skirt-part of her dress like a parasol. The clock hand had long since passed midnight.

"I'm shocked. How could I have mistimed such an important event?"

Something rare happened: she was discouraged.

"Actually, today is my birthday! Oh what happened to my plan of pleading for all kinds of things as soon as the hour would strike twelve..."

"Congratulations," I wished her before she could blurt out any bothersome things.

After she had polished her look, arranging her hair and adjusting her dress, she turned around to me with a smile all over her face. "Nonomiya-kun, you know, the date has changed, so it's my birthday..."

"I just offered you my congratulations. Didn't you listen?"

"I did listen, so I'll give you some belated thanks. But you see, personally I would prefer it if it was not just words, but—"

"No."

"I'm not done yet, Nonomiya-kun. You should hear out what others have to say."

"Remember one thing, Tsukimori. I'm not as good-natured as to hear out something that I know won't be any good."

"Don't worry! I am not going to plead for an expensive present. Well, it is a present, but it's more like a memory or a memento," she said and while doing so, she took out a mobile phone from her dress and thrust it before my nose. "I want a photograph of us."

"...you ask for that while knowing that I don't like photos?"

"You don't?"

She heedlessly feigned ignorance. In the café Usami had once asked for a photograph of me. There was no way Tsukimori didn't know that.

"Please. I won't ask for anything else if you grant me just that one wish. This day is only once in a year, so please!"

In contrast to the begging tone in her voice, she constrained me by grabbing my wrist with both her hands. She was going to have it her way.

"...Okay! But only one, hear me?"

I gave in quickly because I had already learned that the labor required to break through her obstinacy wasn't worth it.

"Thank you so much!" she rejoiced while clapping her hands. "Let's take it in front of the clock tower!" she said and walked off right away, pulling my arm along.

Said tower was three times our size and thickly coated in white paint.

"Mh, which place works best...?" she couldn't decide where she should take the photograph. When I said that it didn't matter, she rebuked me, saying she had only one chance.

As she then asked whether I would let her take several photographs in that case, I had to seal my mouth, leaned against the wall and had no choice but to wait until she decided on a spot.

I had not the slightest idea how that place was different from any other, but she claimed contentedly, "Yes, here it is. It looks like this is the best place for it after all."

"Come here," she waved me over. I positioned myself next to her.

Then she drew close to me like never before. Along with the material of her thin dress, I also felt other, different things that had nothing to do with her clothes.

"If I don't do this, we won't fit in the frame," she claimed with the arm in which she held her mobile phone fully stretched out, before I could object. Thinking that I was supposed to take the photograph because my arm was longer than hers, I snatched her phone. When I confirmed which button I had to press, she told me to wait for a second and took her shawl from her shoulders.

I gazed at her with my arm stretched out, asking myself what she was doing, while she was pulling it over her head and pinning it with a white flower that she had been using as a hair ornament.

"Alright," she said and, probably because I was looking suspiciously at her, added, "Isn't it cute and kind of princess-like?"

Indeed, it suited her so well I forgot to deny it.

I pushed the button on her signal, whereupon a mechanical shutter sound resounded from the phone. Unable to wait, she snatched the mobile phone away from me to take a look at the photo.

While viewing the picture with a satisfied expression, she nodded slightly, "Yes, exactly as I have pictured it."

From time to time she even giggled out. Good for her that the present was to her liking.

"Thank you for letting me take this photograph. I'll treasure it."

"Yeah, treasure it so much that nobody will ever see it and I'll keep my peace of mind."

I didn't even want to imagine what would happen on the day the guys at school found out about this photograph, and I was really fed up with the fact that Kamogawa's visage was the first thing that came to mind.

"What a pity. I already planned on using this valuable picture of you to brag in front of Mirai-san and Chizuru..."

Thank god I forbade her to do so.

"...oh well, I'll enjoy it all alone then. Viewing it as the wallpaper of my mobile phone during classes with a broad smile on my face. Giving it a good-night kiss before going to sleep."

"Should I delete that picture right now?"

"I'm joking, really," she laughed mischievously.

That's how it feels when someone has the better of you.

"Do you want to take a look, too?"

"With pleasure."

As it was the photo of me she was going to hold on to from now on, I felt obliged to check how I looked on it.

I approached my face to the screen of her phone, which she held before her chest, while bending my knees a little. Her next words reached me just when my ear was somewhere near her lips.



After waiting that I had seen the picture, she whispered,

"Did you see? We look like bride and bridegroom at a private wedding à deux in front of a church, don't we?"

I stared at the screen. Depicted was a black-dressed man and a white-dressed woman who happily clung to each other.

With only a little imagination, the shawl on the head of the woman looked like a bride's wedding veil. And mysteriously, as soon as I viewed the woman like that, the man, too, looked as though he wore a dress suit.

Imprinting is a really dreadful phenomenon: I noticed that the clock tower looked like part of a church. If the bride had held a bouquet, it would have been a wedding ceremony no matter the way you looked at it.

I reflexively reached out to steal it out of her hands, but she evaded me, turning around like a dancing petal.

"Give me that phone."

"No! I am sure you would delete the picture if I gave it to you."

"Of course I would!"

I reached out to her again. However, she sped away like a tiny, winged fairy dancing with her toes over a water surface, so that the distance between us grew and grew. She then climbed on a slide.

"Nonomiya-kun, I am here!" she waved innocently from above, almost like a child.

Youko Tsukimori was wild and free when she revealed her true colors. Way too much to handle for a spiritless person like me.

"I'm leaving."

This night had tired me.

"Wait!" she shouted from above when I went past the slide to leave the park. I only turned my head and looked up at her.

"Why did you come alone tonight?"

Lit by the moonlight and shrouded in a veil, snow-white Tsukimori looked majestic as Jeanne D'Arc must have been.

"Why didn't you tell anyone about the murder recipe? There were more than enough opportunities, right? Just take Konan for an example... don't you think he would have been able to make people lend an ear even to your absurd story?" she asked in a slightly gloomy voice.

The only thing that was in her eyes as she looked down at me in the pointed silence without moving a muscle was I.

I accidentally bent over laughing.

Why? Because I immediately realized how easily I could answer her question. To think that I hadn't even known myself properly until recently despite being so cautious about anyone else, I really was a fool.

Now my answer was clear.

Whether she had killed her parents or someone else, whether she was guilty or innocent, even if there was to be an incident that most clearly implied murder in spite of being just an accident that happened because of a chain of unfortunate coincidences—those questions didn't matter.

She raised her brow at the edge of my field of vision.

"That's a simple question—" I spoke towards the night sky.

"—I am the only one in the world who has the right to doubt you."

We didn't need any others. It was more than enough if only I knew the real Youko Tsukimori.

At last, the cold night wind carried a heated whisper to me.

"...Mm, I'm not lonely after all."

My eyes must have been wide open when I turned them to the slide that was lit by the silver spotlight.

She was smiling with tears in her eyes, almost weeping with joy.

As I didn't know what I should reply, I closed my mouth and burned the appearance of an unknown Youko Tsukimori into my memory.

Suddenly, she cowered down. Then she slid down without even caring about her clothes or exposition of her skirt, started to run and jumped straight onto my back, upon which she wrapped her arms tightly around me.

While burying her face in my back, she said with a somewhat muffled voice,

"—You are the only one in the world to whom I grant the right to doubt me."

She sounded joyous.

I am not so tolerant as to let someone cling to me without permission, but her arms were so tight around me that I couldn't shake her off. She was like a shackle chaining me, which represented our current relationship ridiculously well.

I gave up resisting and looked up at the night sky along with a sigh.

The fine silver light from the moon shone down on the earth like silk threads, which were absorbed by the earth. Without a break, as if the moon was trying to dye all the creatures on earth in its white light.

Compared to the moonlight, any other type of light seemed ever so weak. No matter how bright the stars twinkled, no matter how much light the streets of the town emitted, nothing could match the all-enveloping moonlight.

Without noticing, I reached out for the moon—while knowing that I would definitely not reach it.

The decision I made that night might have been wrong. Perhaps I was going to regret it for a long time.

No, perhaps I would not even have the opportunity to regret.

Because I had come to know Youko Tsukimori.

I closed my eyes without moving my head away.

The moon that night was very soft and warm.

Afterword

80% is quite a high probability.

If, for example, you get 80 points in a 100 point test, nobody's going to complain, or if you go outside without an umbrella even though the weather forecast has predicted rain with a probability of 80%, you're just reckless. Now, having said that:

Of ten candidates eight are awarded a prize in the final selection. It's not possible *not* to start dreaming, is it?

"If I won, I could use the prize money as an initial payment for a new car!", "I could easily buy the Blu-ray box of Stellvia!" Who can blame me for having such empty dreams?

But as you may know, the result was communicated to me with the words "It is with deep regret that we must..." and thus crushed the modest and fragile dreams of a petit bourgeois like me with the same destructive power as an iron hammer.

However! As the saying goes, when one door shuts, another opens.

"It is with deep regret that we must tell you that your submitted work has failed the selection. We are, however, very eager to make it accessible to the public."

No hesitation. Like a shot! I raised my voice and came clear:

"I refuse!"

I would have given my right arm for such a compelling offer. Having a book published through the admired Dengeki Bunko label—a dream for a book author like me. However, my pride is on the line. I want to stay on the orange-juice side of things whatever happens! One day, I want to win that prize with my own power and proudly open the doors to ASCII Media Works. This is my firm determination.

Ah, come to think of it, I haven't introduced myself yet. How unmindful of me. My name is Natsuki Mamiya and I have had the honor to make my debut at Dengeki Bunko with my novel "Gekkou".

...err, well. Look! Does pride fill your stomach? Can you buy a new car with pride?! What would you do, dear readers?

Crumple that useless pride and woooooooooooooooooooooosh there it goes flying into the bin!

The acknowledgment.

Yuzame-sama and Kumeta-sama, it's thanks to you that "Gekkou" exists. I thank you with all my heart. By the way, who should I charge for the Blu-ray box of Stellvia? I'm waiting for your contact.

I also would like to thank Shiromiso-sama and the other parties involved in the making of the gorgeous illustrations.

Furthermore, I would like to express my gratitude to my parents, my little sister, my friends and all the other people I know... or so I thought, but I'll just tell them after I finish writing this, since that's much faster.

Last but not least, my deepest thanks to you, who is reading this text this very moment. I am so happy right now I could shed tears. I'm looking forward to the day we meet again. This was *Natsuki Mamiya*.

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